

VOLUME 6

Year 0

Tatooine Manhunt

Read Aloud

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. . .

EXTERIOR: SPACECRAFT IN SPACE. *The Imperial Star Destroyer Relentless docks with Kwenn Space Station.*

INTERIOR: IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER — AUDIENCE CHAMBER. *Twin blast doors slide open, revealing the dark interior of a massive chamber. An Imperial captain stands upon a high platform, flanked by lower officers. Two stormtroopers march in. They drop a manacled prisoner at the feet of Captain Parlan, commander of the warship.*

"The charge," demands Parlan.

"Piracy, sir," snaps a trooper.

"Kill the scum," Parlan replies coldly.

"Wait!" screams the prisoner, "I have something to bargain with. Information important to the Emperor . . . in exchange for my life."

Parlan's dead eyes gleam triumphantly: "Go ahead. I'm all ears."

"Tallon . . . it concerns Adar Tallon . . ."

Parlan listens intently to the pirate's tale, then issues orders. Quietly, Ensign Dana pockets a data storage pad and slips away.

The commander issues one final order: "Lieutenant Voor, send for the bounty hunters."

Fade to . . .

INTERIOR: KWENN SPACE STATION.

1st Rebel: Are you sure this is where we're supposed to meet this Dana person?

2nd Rebel: Sure I'm sure! This is the place in her message — Kwenn Space Station. *vvt*

3rd Rebel: Yup, good ol' Kwenn. The final fuel and supply point before the Outer Rim Territories. Why would Dana choose such a desolate place for pick up? *Smugg*

4th Rebel: Probably because her last mission was an undercover assignment aboard the Star Destroyer *Relentless*.

5th Rebel: You mean she was on that Imperial monstrosity parked outside?

6th Rebel: Not only on it, she served as an officer these past few months, gathering all kinds of information for the Alliance.

4th Rebel: Still, her mission had another few weeks to go. I wonder why she decided to jump ship early?

5th Rebel: Her message sounded urgent. Code Green — Agent in trouble, pick up immediately.

6th Rebel: And she mentioned the name Adar Tallon.

2nd Rebel: Everyone got excited about that. Clue me in, who is this Adar Tallon person?

1st Rebel: What planet are you from? Commander Tallon was a hero back before the Empire, in the days of the Old Republic.

3rd Rebel: He was a brilliant tactician and naval officer. His space-fighting strategies and maneuvers were years ahead of their time, and are still used by us and the Imperials.

2nd Rebel: You mean the guy whose statues were torn down by the Emperor a while back? That Adar Tallon? I thought he was dead.

6th Rebel: He is. Commander Tallon died fighting pirates in Dalchon sector. His ship was obliterated. No wreckage, no survivors, nothing! Heck, there wasn't even enough left to give him a decent burial.

1st Rebel: Don't be gross. Let's just get to the rendezvous point, find Dana, and get back to our ship. I'll feel a whole lot better with some distance between us and that Star Destroyer out there.

3rd Rebel: She should be right around the next bend.

4th Rebel: There she is! But hey, wasn't she supposed to be alone?

5th Rebel: You know, I've got a bad feeling about this . . .



ut-Away to the *Relentless*

Read aloud:

EXTERIOR: SPACECRAFT IN SPACE. *The Imperial Star Destroyer Relentless, docked with Kwenn Space Station.*

INTERIOR: IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER — BRIDGE. *Captain Parlan stands upon the command platform, watching the space station through bridge viewports. A lower officer steps up and clears his throat.*

"Speak," orders Parlan.

"The crews have worked through the night and all systems have been repaired," snaps the officer. "In addition, astrogation has calculated an optimum hyperspace route that will get us to Tatooine by tomorrow evening."

Parlan's eyes sparkle and his lip turns up in an evil smile. "Then Tallon's mine! Order immediate departure."

Fade to . . .

EXTERIOR: THE TATOOINE DESERT



ut-Away to the *Relentless*

Read aloud to the players:

EXTERIOR: SPACECRAFT IN SPACE. *Streaks of blinding color whip past the Imperial Star Destroyer Relentless as the giant craft moves through hyperspace.*

INTERIOR: IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER — PARLAN'S CHAMBER. *Captain Parlan, alone in his chamber. A strange sound enters the room and light begins to play across Parlan's dark features. He looks up and bows quickly. A 12-foot hologram of Darth Vader materializes before Parlan.*

"Everything proceeds according to plan, Lord Vader," says Parlan. "We are about to come out of light-speed just beyond Tatooine system. Nothing can possibly go wrong."

"See that it doesn't, Captain Parlan," replies Vader grimly. "Do not fail the Emperor . . . or me."

Fade to . . .

EXTERIOR: MOS EISLEY SPACEPORT.

C

ut-Away to the *Relentless*

Read aloud to the players:

**INTERIOR: IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER —
PARLAN'S CHAMBER.**

A close-up of the giant image of Darth Vader, his holographic form filling the scene. A choking sound echoes from somewhere out of sight. The scene expands, revealing more of the room, as the twisted, pained form of Captain Parlan crashes to the floor.

"Apology accepted, Captain Parlan," says Vader coldly.

Cut to . . .

CREDITS AND TITLE THEME.

Lumrunners

Captain Orr gazed at the computer screen before him, eyes darting across the scrolling readout. "Are you positive that this is the ship we were told about?" he demanded of the customs agent controlling the starport datafeed.

"Yes sir, " the controller replied confidently. "The informant stated that the Corellian PB-950 designated Lumrunner might be one of the ships attempting to smuggle contraband arms out of Gallisport tonight. The ship is registered to a Captain Shamus Falconi, and its transponder code has been confirmed with BoSS, sir. "

"Any outstanding warrants on Captain Falconi?" Orr asked eagerly.

"No, sir, his record is clean. Shall I inform Starport Control to give the ship landing clearance?"

An icy smile crossed Orr's pinched face. "Excellent. " he purred. "Yes, have the port authority grant standard clearance, then place Lieutenant Smythers and his inspection team on alert. Have a detachment of stormtroopers and a full scanning team join him outside the ship's clocking bay. He is to take no action until I arrive. I will handle this inspection personally. "

Turning to face the startled controller. Orr pulled an ornately-carved bantha bone pipe out of his pocket and packed it tightly with a pinch of tabacc. "These petty smugglers never learn, " Orr stated, adopting a superior tone. "They flitter about the galaxy plying their Illicit trade, making a mockery of the Emperor's laws - all the while believing themselves too clever to be caught. And the gall of this one naming his ship Lumrunner, just begging to be taught a lesson. "

Orr paused, relishing the angry emotion building within. Placing the pipe to his mouth, he ignited his flamer and lit the tabbac. Then, staring into the still-burning flame, he continued. "I think it's time to take some of the cockiness out of Captain Falconi's attitude. I wonder how he will take it when a competent representative of the Empire inspects his ship. " With a flourishing pinch of fingers, he snuffed out the match's flame. "Yes, we'll see how smug he is soon enough. "

* * *

Captain of the Port ReneaLuies waited patiently at the monitoring post near bay 1831. Through macrobinoculars he watched intently as the ancient patrol boat broke from its holding orbit and began its long descent. After checking his chrono and noting the time for official records. Port Captain Luies turned his attention back toward the Imperial Customs officer hovering nervously beside him.

Seldom was Captain Luies impressed by the trappings of Imperial uniforms. Unlike his own deep blue uniform, resplendent in appearance with its gold and red braiding, he found Imperial uniforms drab and unexciting. Very much like this young Lieutenant Smythers who had barged into his private offices demanding immediate attention. While Captain Luies was officially in charge, the Empire would often take control of the starport's resources. So, like many times before. Captain Luies and his port troopers found themselves relegated to the role of backup muscle, treated as little more than hired hands in their own starport. Captain Luies found this demeaning and insulting. Still, this was the Empire and he was just a loyal servant.

Smiling broadly. Luies activated a monitoring station and motioned for the lieutenant to observe. "I've verified the identification of those already present in the docking bay, " he announced, adjusting the display screen. "The Arcona you see by the skiffs is Dutan He operates a mining supply business and has no

criminal record. The human next to him is Chop Harlison, a swoop technician a minor record of theft and public misconduct. The others you see there are mostly scum. They are members of a local swoop gang, hired as cheap labor. They appear to be unarmed, although they could be concealing most anything.

"I've made a copy of our files for your records, " stated Luies, handing over a datacard. "Now if you will come this way. Lieutenant Smythers, we can check on the deployment of our guards. "

* * *

"All right. Grasheel, we've been granted clearance to land at clocking bay 1831. Start calibrating the scanners. " Shamus Falconi announced while adjusting the course of the ancient patrol boat. He glanced over his shoulder at the giant sable-furred Wookiee seated at the ship's engineering station. The Wookiee's massive hands danced over the scanner controls making delicate adjustments to the ship's most sensitive equipment.

Grasheel gave a questioning growl and fiddled with a large hoop earring tied into his fur where it would normally be worn on a human.

"No, I don't think it makes you look dashing. Besides, I don't think he wanted to give it to you. "

Grasheel protested loudly, with a deafening series of grunts and howls.

"I know you gave him back his ear. I just don't think he saw the generosity in it. Personally I think you look... " Shamus was cut short by the bleeping of a ship's alarm indicating that they were being scanned.

Below them the planet's largest starport slid into view. Shamus killed the alarm and made a minor adjustment to the ship's speed. "Wait for it... get ready... now!" he yelled. Immediately Grasheel's hands flew into a flurry of motion. There were very few beings in the galaxy who could perform a lifescan reading as quickly and as thoroughly as Grasheel could - still, what they were doing left no margin for error. By piggybacking their sensor scan along the return frequency of the starport scan, the smugglers hoped to get a reading of their landing bay without appearing suspicious. If they were being watched, focused sensor activity at this late stage would be like showing your hand at a high stakes sabacc game.

Grasheel let out a grunt of satisfaction as he displayed his findings.

"We've attracted a welcoming committee, " Shamus concluded.

"From the numbers and deployment, I'd say they're Imperials. " Grasheel shook his head in confirmation, and made a questioning sound. "Yes, I'm sure this will work. Besides - it's too late to back out now. "

* * *

Inside docking bay 1831, Chop Harlison watched the massive patrol-boat-turned cargo ship land. Amidst a series of metallic clanks and the high pitched whines, the Corellian PB-950 settled heavily upon ancient landing struts. Several of Chop's swoopers started forward, heading toward the ship's outer hatches. He motioned them back. Across the landing bay he observed Dutan Lee powering up the cargo skiff. Catching Dutan's attention, he shot him a questioning look. The Arconan arms dealer appeared calm and relaxed, and, like Chop, appeared to be waiting for something else. Seconds ticked by as the Lumrunner powered clown, returning the bay to relative silence. Chop watched the cockpit closely, and could see the shapes of the pilots moving about. Then the lights in the cockpit were turned off, plunging it into complete darkness broken only by the brief flare of a flamer.

That was what he waited for: the signal that they were being watched. Now Chop began to worry in earnest. Which course of action should they take? Stand firm and bluff it out, or leave as quickly as possible? His swoopers began to get nervous, eyeing the various exits of the bay, plotting possible escape routes. Sweat trickled clown his back as he waited for the ship's main ramp to extend. As the boarding hatch cycled open, the choking odors of smoke and lum emanated forth from the bowels of the ship and two figures strode down the ramp.

The huge Wookiee bounded clown the ramp first, puffing heavily on a thick cigarillo and trailing large clouds of greenish-blue smoke. Shamus casually sauntered behind him. Chop breathed a little easier - the Wookiee was smoking the cigarillo. Chop turned back toward his men. They had seen the signal, and were settling back down - preparing to bluff it out.

Chop moved forward, bellowing out a welcome. "Shamus Falconi, you old lumrunner. Right on time as usual. " He held out a meaty hand to shake.

A low growl slipped from Grasheel, who moved to intercept the two. Grasheel was odd-looking, even for a Wookiee. He wore various ornaments braided into his sable fur which only added to his intimidating visage. A silky red scarf was tied around his shaggy head, obviously a fashion the Wookiee had taken fancy to.

"Oh, sorry Grasheel, I was just getting to you. " Chop comforted the Wookiee's injured pride, maneuvering to avoid a crushing hug. "Yes, welcome Captain Falconi, " Dutan Lee offered, joining the group at the base of the ramp.

"Evening, gentlemen. Let's get started, " Shamus grinned at the two. Plucking the cigarillo from the Wookiee's mouth he tossed it across the landing bay. "Put that thing out, you overgrown carpet, its giving me a headache. "

Further conversation was cut short, as a massive groan emanated from the landing bay's main doors. Advancing rapidly as the doors parted, a squad of white-armored stormtroopers moved into the landing bay and assumed defensive positions. From behind and above, more noise could be heard, indicating that armed troops had also taken positions along the docking bay walls. The Empire had arrived in docking bay 1831, and the boarding of the Lumrunner had just begun.

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Flanked by Luies and Smythers, Captain Orr strode confidently among his men toward the group gathered at the base of the Lumrunner. Wearing the evil smile of the ferrcat caught eating the womp rat, he took a brief moment to enjoy the shocked looks of this evening's prey. "My name is Captain Orr of the Imperial Customs Bureau. I will be conducting an inspection of your vessel and the cargoes exchanging hands in the name of the Emperor. I trust that there will be no objections. " Orr examined the assembled faces, watching for signs of trouble.

"None at all. Captain. " Shamus spoke for the group. "Happy to oblige the Empire. " His expression said otherwise.

"You are Captain Falconi?" Orr asked the lanky redhead before him. Not waiting for a reply, he turned toward the Wookiee. "And this thing must be your co-pilot Grasheel. I trust his permits are in order. "The Wookiee stuck forth a massive hand, but quickly aborted the handshake when a stormtrooper raised his blaster. Studying the swoop tech and the Arcona, Orr pressed on. "State your name and business, " he demanded.

Luies stepped forward to speak, hut was cut off by Lieutenant

Smythers "Captain Luies, you may rejoin your men. This is an Imperial matter. "

Captain Luies faltered for a second, then snapped to attention. "If you will excuse me, sir, " he stated pleasantly to Captain Orr.

Lieutenant Smythers produced a datacard and plugged it carefully into his datapad. "Sir. I've taken the liberty of identifying these beings and have assembled their complete histories. "

Orr commandeered the datapad. "Excellent. Lieutenant. As always. I am impressed with with your foresight and efficiency. "

Lieutenant Smythers visibly glowed from the compliment. "Shall we proceed, sir?"

* * *

Dutan Lee was at a loss. Falconi had given the signal that something was up, and now Imperials were breathing down their necks. This was not good, no, definitely not good at all.

"Your name and business. Arcona?" the Imperial captain demanded. It took a moment for Dutan Lee to realize that the question had been repeated. "I am Dutan Lee of Dutan Mining Supply Exports. We produce all of our products here in Gallisport. Captain. This is a shipment of parts headed for the Mestra System. " Lee's tongue twitched nervously as several stormtroopers approached the outbound cargo and began unlatching crates. How could Falconi allow this? He knew these crates contained stolen Imperial weapons.

What a terrible mess, he thought to himself. Dutan Lee knew how the Empire treated smugglers and arms dealers.

The troopers succeeded in opening the first crate, breaking the local customs seals in the process. Peering inside, the lead stormtrooper announced. "Mining equipment. "

"Sergeant, you won't find anything right on top. Sometimes you must be more thorough. " Lieutenant Smythers chuckled. Releasing the side latches, he allowed the front of the packing case to fall away, spilling its contents at their feet.

While the stormtrooper examined the contents. Dutan Lee contemplated how he would spend the last few minutes of his life "Mining equipment. " the stormtrooper stated flatly. "Move on to the next one. "

Finally forcing himself to look. Dutan Lee couldn't believe his luck. The weapons weren't in the crates! A slight pause followed that thought. The weapons weren't in the crates? But if they weren't in the crates, where did they disappear to? Double-crossed, stabbed in the back, robbed of my livelihood! The thoughts poured through his mind. This wouldn't be the first time smugglers tried to cheat him.

While crate after crate of mining equipment and parts were unceremoniously dumped. Lee's fear was replaced by anger. "What have you done! That equipment better not be damaged! I still have to sell it! What are your operating numbers?"

To pacify the angry Arcona, Lieutenant Smythers ordered Port Captain Luies and his soldiers to repack the the crates. "Be sure to affix Imperial seals on these crates. Luies. " Imperial seals insured customs inspectors that the case had been thoroughly examined by the Bureau of Customs. As long as the seals showed no sign of tampering they could bypass normal customs posts and be delivered directly to the end customer. "That should be more than enough to appease this 'businessman', " Smythers stated in disgust. A stormtrooper watched as Captain Luies and his men went to work, passing out Imperial seals as they progressed.

* * *

Lieutenant Smythers hesitantly approached Captain Orr. "Sir, perhaps our informer was incorrect. Should we move on to our next suspect?"

Deep in thought. Captain Orr absently stroked his chin as he calculated his next move. "No, Lieutenant, something is going on here, I can feel it, " he whispered. Then very loudly he announced, "Bring in the scanning team. I want a scan of this landing bay made at once. And then we begin on the ship. Give me a complete scan of the ship and its contents. Be thorough - we wouldn't want Captain Falconi to think he was given less than proper treatment. "

"We wouldn't want that, would we, Grasheel?" Falconi muttered to his companion. The Wookiee responded with a low rumble.

"You might as well just tell us what you're smuggling today. Captain Falconi, " Orr said. "My scanning team is one of the best in the Empire. I hand-picked them personally, and they aren't easily fooled. " He offered. "Confess now and I'll be lenient on you and your companion. It might even save you a trip to the spice mines of Kessel. " Orr laughed evilly as he glared at the pair of smugglers. The smugglers were definitely getting nervous, Orr thought. Look how they squirm. They'll break, even if I have to break them myself.

Minutes passed by in silence as the scanning team performed its duty. After what seemed a lifetime the team returned.

"The ship's clean, sir. " the ranking scanner tech announced.

"Clean? That can't be. Did you check for hidden compartments? They always try using hidden compartments, " Orr exclaimed furiously.

"Yes, sir. There was no indication of hidden areas aboard the ship. The cargo compartments registered clean also. Preliminary readings indicated industrial-grade repulsorlift coils and various alcohols, sir. "

Stunned, but not deterred, Orr waved for Smythers and the two smugglers to follow him into the cargo hold. "I believe we will have to do this the old-fashioned way. "

* * *

Lieutenant Smythers followed Captain Orr, carefully staying to his superior's right and a little behind. The academy instilled proper protocol into its cadets, and this had followed Smythers to his backwater assignment. The only way to advance in the Imperial Navy was to please your superiors. Smythers excelled at this task, keeping Captain Orr constantly updated and informed, following his orders to the letter. And while Captain Orr had never been proven wrong before, the Lieutenant was beginning to have doubts about this inspection.

The cargo holds were piled high with crates and boxes, and smelled of lum and something else. Orr smiled, as was his habit when he knew he had caught his prey. The cargo holds reeked of guilt. "Excellent, " he said. Orr turned to the assembled stormtroopers and boarding officers who had followed them inside. "Turn this hold inside-out. I want to show the good Captain Falconi here that we don't play games in Gallisport. " Orr took up a position behind Shamus and Grashell to observe their reactions as his men began their investigations.

Smythers briskly assigned positions and tasks, then turned his personal attention to the cases labeled as alcohol. The visual inspection progressed slowly and Smythers could sense Captain Orr's impatience. "Only lum and Corellian wine so far, sir" he announced.

"Move those crates aside. Smythers, and proceed to the rear. If they are hiding anything it will be back there. " Orr said. "And they do seem to be getting more nervous the farther you move back. "

Boxes were quickly pushed aside as a path was made to the back of the cargo hold. Smythers stole a look at the two smugglers, who were definitely fidgeting and sweating now. "Open one of those boxes back there, " he ordered one stormtrooper. The case was promptly opened, exposing several bottles with green labels, one of which was passed to Smythers. "More lum, sir. " the Lieutenant stated meekly. The red flush of rage colored Orr's face. Smythers couldn't help but think he would receive the brunt of the coming explosion.

"Well. Lieutenant?" Orr hissed. "Don't just stand there. Open it

The cap pulled off easily and Smythers gave the bottle a quick sniff. "Smells like lum, sir. "

"Odors can be deceiving. Lieutenant. I think we should perform a test to be sure. Have the Wookiee take a drink from it. "

Panic almost overwhelmed Smythers as he pushed the bottle toward Grasheel. The Wookiee was shaking his head quite vigorously, waving the approaching bottle away. Smythers remembered a saying his grandmother once told him: "You can lead a Wookiee to lum, but you can't make him drink." The Wookiee would not accept the bottle.

"What's wrong with him, Falconi? Does he know something that you're not telling me?" Orr asked.

"Actually, he does." Falconi offered with a shrug. "It's not his brand."

Furiously, Orr grabbed the bottle and thrust it into the Wookiee's massive hands. "Captain Falconi," he raged, "he will drink this right now or I'll impound your ship from now until time's end. Do I make myself clear?"

Grasheel exchanged a final worried look with Falconi and brought the proffered bottle to his lips. Closing his eyes, he took a cautious sip of the thick liquid. The Wookiee convulsed as a series of massive coughs racked his body. Then, opening one eye, a look of surprise crossed his furry face - after which followed a happy bellow as Grasheel guzzled down the rest of the lum in record time.

* * *

TG-421 halted in front of the crates supposedly filled with repulsor coils. The stormtrooper was eager to get the inspection over with. "Spread out and start opening random crates," he ordered his squad. "Compare the contents with the cargo manifest. Report any discrepancies immediately." Approaching the nearest crate, he cracked the seal. The lid swung open easily, revealing several large industrial repulsor coils packed for shipping. He motioned to the scanning team as he carefully lifted the heavy coil out of its packing material. The coil proved slippery and hard to hold. Instinctively he clutched the coil, pressing it firmly against his chest.

It wasn't until the scanner tech had completed the reading that TG^121 realized his mistake. The coils had been coated with an anti-corrosion gel to protect them during shipping. He immediately dropped the offending coil back into the crate. Reading the packing instructions carefully he backed away from the case as though it were a thermal detonator. "Anti-Corr 113!" he panicked

voice crackled over the stormtrooper communication net. "Visual inspection only! Don't touch the coils!"

His warning was too late for some of the other stormtroopers. He watched in horror as the once-gleaming white armor of his squad started changing to a pasty blue wherever it had touched the Anti-corr. Items treated with Anti-Corr 113 could remain exposed to high heats and dangerous environments for years with no adverse effects. Unfortunately, its only side effect was the nasty habit of dyeing everything it contacted a rather sickly shade of blue. It was specially designed to penetrate deeply for protection and seldom ever polished or buffed out. TG-421 could only watch helplessly as his troopers inadvertently spread the contamination further in vain attempts to wipe off their soiled armor.

* * *

The stormtrooper squad assembled outside the Lurnrunner, attempting to hide the blue stains. Smythers waited patiently behind Orr while the two free-traders and their customers stood near the ramp of the ship awaiting the verdict. Orr gazed at the scoundrels long and hard in a last attempt to glean anything incriminating out of them. "You're very lucky Captain Falconi. Your ship is clean. " he finally proclaimed, infuriated by the smug look that passed over the Pair's face. He knew they were dirty. And while he couldn't lock t hem away, he could make their lives miserable.

"I want the two of you out of my starport in one hour. " he hissed "or I'll have you brought upon charges of loitering. Is that clear?" No objections were voiced. "Good. Lieutenant Smythers, let's... "

"Excuse me-Captain Orr?" Port Captain Luies interrupted holding out his datapad. "I will need you to sign off on these Imperial seals

Orr took the datapad and scanned it briefly. After authorizing the manifest, he downloaded a copy into the official Imperial records. Handing back the datapad, he ordered. "Captain Luies, make sure that these cargoes are exchanged immediately. Use as many of your men as needed. I want these two and their ship out of my starport in one hour... or I will hold you personally responsible. "

It was a furious Captain Orr who lead the procession of Imperials out of clocking bay 1831. He had just been made a fool and needed a new target to lash out at. "Smythers, what's the next ship due in?"

The Lieutenant scanned his datapad for the list the informer provided. "The Last Chance, a Corellian YT-1300, captained by a Platt Okeefe, sir. " he offered.

"Excellent. " Orr purred. "Excellent. "

* * *

Once the Imperials had left. Port Captain Luies activated his comlink. "Bring it in. " Luies smiled as two repulsor skiffs bearing starport insignia pulled through the open bay doors, stopping at the ship's loading ramp. Groups of Lilies' troopers were joined by Chop's swoopers as they began unloading various crates and boxes bearing Imperial Seals.

"What's going on?" Dutan Lee demanded.

"Just getting your cargo ready for loading. Dutan. You do still want to be part of this deal, don't you?" Shamus answered with a small grin

"But what about those containers full of mining equipment?"

"You can thank Port Captain Luies here for those, and for keeping your cargo safe while we pulled off this little stunt. " Captain Luies bowed slightly at the mention of his name. "We now have legal documentation to bypass all inspection along the way to Mestra. Those seals on the mining equipment have different numbers than the seals on your containers. "

A look of dawning crossed the Arcona's face. "Well now, this is a surprise, isn't it, " Dutan Lee beamed.

"Really, it was nothing. " Luies proclaimed. Producing a second datapad from behind his back he bowed again. "A mere slight of hand, nothing more. "

"Now while the men do their work, let's go inside to settle our debts. " Shamus motioned towards the ship's interior. When everyone was seated, he continued. "Chop, your shipment of refined Tibanna gas is stored in the first few crates of lum, the ones with the red labels. Luckily for us they always think

that we try to hide things as far away from them as possible, right Grasheel?" The Wookiee gave a positive bellow. "The military coils you requested are tucked inside those big industrial coils. A sharp rap on the end and you'll find that they easily slide out. Oh, and make sure you wear gloves. Don't want to stain your hands on that Anti-Corr. "

"Thanks. Shamus. I appreciate it. " he said with a toothy grin.

"You play a dangerous game. Captain Falconi. Which is why you're one of my favorites, " Luies chimed in. "Now, can we get to the business of compensation?"

A quick exchange of credits left everyone happy. The smugglers lost a little money on this leg of the trip, but delivering those weapons hidden in the mining equipment for Mestra would more than make up for it. "I think we should celebrate. " Falconi proclaimed, pulling a bottle of Socorran raava out from under a seat. He poured everyone a round.

"Captain! Socorran raava is illegal here in Gallisport!" Luies shouted at Shamus, while jumping to his feet. The room fell silent.

"What do you suggest we do about it, Inspector?"

"Dispose of the evidence, " Luies replied, downing his drink with a satisfied smile.

Shamus toasted Port Captain Luies. "This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship. "

Old Corellian: A Guide To The Curious Scholar

Language is an organism. The entity of language is born, germinates, hybrids itself, and through the earnestness of social and political forces, languages can even die.

— Arner Figgis, Chief Linguist
University at Be'nal, Issor

Arner Figgis paced the uneven face of the dune, whispering inanely under his breath. Stumbling over a hardened crest of soot and sand, he exploded, "Again! Say it again, but slower!"

Trep Winterrs bit his lip as he fought back a caustic response to the old Issori's abrupt show of temper. Throwing his arms over his chest, the agitated smuggler firmly pursed his lips, prepared to hyper-exaggerate the necessary syllables. "*Doaba ol'val tru, olys guerlle*." He laughed softly, despite himself, listening to the troubled grumbling of his peculiar companion, a genuine university scholar, who had hired him out of Mos Eisley.

Figgis straightened, fretting over a wrinkle in the fine fabric of his ankle-length tunic and cloak. "Must make a good appearance," he whispered absently, licking his forefinger and then drawing the damp tip over his creased forehead. "*Doaba ol'val tru, olys guerlle*. That's it!" Patting Trep on the shoulders, he gushed, "I think I've got it!"

Straightening one of his long, black curls, Trep shook his head. "I still think it's a bad idea, professor. You can't just walk in there ... not alone."

"I'm paying you to pilot and to advise me of time-eccentric, idiosyncratic colloquialisms, not to chaperone."

"Fine!" Trep threw up his hands. "It's your neck. Remember that." He started down the dune crests, sliding along the smooth face of the black sand. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Good enough." Careful to follow in the smuggler's tracks, Figgis struggled down the steep incline, using one hand to hold his tunic up, while supporting himself with the other on Trep's shoulder. Panting for breath, he huffed, "Now, once again, tell me about this bartender."

"His name is Karl Ancher. Usually he's behind the bar, so you can't miss him."

"Yes, yes, of course. He's the one you mentioned on Mos Eisley."

As if regretting his decision to take on the job, Trep said, "Look, do us both a favor, Figgis. Don't just walk up to the man and start in on him about your academic credentials. Ancher's been around a long time — pay the man a little respect."

"Of course. This *olys guerlle* — is it a title?"

"Literally, it means old guard. It's a title of respect, meaning that you recognize Ancher's achievements as a self-made businessman." Trep growled irritably, exasperated by the implications of the scholar's work. "Why can't I go with you?"

Figgis made a peculiar face. "And have you do what? Blunder

through the methodology of linguistic science? Don't be absurd!"

"Why can't it wait until morning, when it's not so crowded? There are at least 150 people in there."

"Because discovery waits for no man! The precise calculations of research are a waking man's delight, not intended for the light sleeper." Watchfully observing a passing parade of Ibhaan'I nomads, he declared, "If I wasted one precious minute, I could be usurped by some young upstart from the university."

"If you make one wrong move in there," Trep pointed to the Black Dust tavern, "you won't have to worry about those young upstarts." He paused dramatically, "You'll be dead!"

"Make no promises you cannot keep," Figgis growled, glaring at the overbearing smuggler. Gathering his tunic, he stormed across the deserted streets to a side entrance into the bar.

Pulled into a raucous world of unusually tumultuous noise and boisterous voices, Figgis allowed himself to be swept along in a unruly tide of faces and bodies moving toward the bar. With so much stimuli, it was difficult for the scholar to concentrate, as choice phrases of Old Corellian and authentic Socorran found their way to his ears. Reeling from the sensory overload, Figgis leaned against the bar.

"What can I do you for?" the bartender inquired. Despite the good-nature inherent in his voice, it was obvious, even to Figgis, that the Corellian suspected something was amiss.

Karl Ancher was a powerfully built man, broad at the shoulders and chest, while showing a healthy thickness through the middle; exactly as Trep had described him. A lifetime of weather and scars had aged his handsome face, leaving only the brilliance of his eyes to betray the fullness of those long, enduring years. Figgis confidently stepped up to the counter and declared, "*Doaba ol'val tru, olys guerfel.*"

Slamming his meaty fists against the counter top, Ancher's face flushed several angry shades of crimson. Rattled by the sudden explosion, bar patrons throughout the tavern turned to see the commotion as the smuggler bellowed, "What?" He clenched his teeth so tightly his jawbone cracked audibly. "What did you call me?"

At a loss for the first time in 56 years as a scholar, Figgis floundered, gawking at the infuriated stranger. Behind him, he could hear the subtle pop of blaster restraint straps being unsnapped, as anxious hands reached in anticipation of recompense for the newcomer's ignorant sin.

"*Doaba-tru, Ancher*," Trep Winterrs whispered from the bar's side entrance. In the stillness, his voice seemed to echo into the far corners of the tavern. "*Yke feln noh petchuk*." When the tension in the room failed to ease, even slightly, Trep turned to the bar patrons, showing his best smile. Jerking his thumb over his shoulder to indicate Figgis, he joked, "*Min chumani, ... sahsahlah ...*"

The entire front room erupted in fits of riotous, bawdy laughter. Slipping blasters back into holsters, the spectators returned to their drinks and conversation, ignoring the frightened old man standing alone at the bar. Figgis hurried to Trep's side, using the smuggler as a shield between himself and the crowd. "What did I say?"

Never breaking that polished smile, Trep nodded to a few familiar faces. "You called Ancher an old fool," he replied between clenched teeth. The smuggler laughed softly, nodding appreciatively to Ancher to thank the Corellian for his understanding and patience with the eccentric stranger.

Moving only the wild brown of his eyes, Figgis stood motionless, afraid to flex even the slightest muscle. "What should I do?"

"The only thing you can do." Taking the linguist by the shoulders, he led him back to the bar. "Buy the man a drink. After all, it's his bar. He'll appreciate the thought behind the gesture."

"And then?"

"And then leave him alone. You've already pushed your luck too far."

"But my research?"

Leaning against the counter, Trep surveyed the numerous shadowy forms moving in and about the dimness. "You'll have to improvise, professor. If you want to learn Old Corellian, you have to study the people behind the language."

At a nearby table, a Sullustan, a Rodian, a Human man, and a woman were engaged in a heated argument over a misdealt sabacc card. While the Sullustan and the woman threw virulent threats and accusations at each other, the Rodian nodded to his partner and together they went for their blasters. Despite their artfulness, the woman was the fastest and repaid insult with blaster fire. Each of the three hapless culprits slumped to the floor, their chests smoking profusely from the point-blank blasts.

Trep grinned roguishly, approaching the woman with caution. Pulling a chair out from under the Rodian's body, he shoved Figgis down into the seat and deliberately tossed a few credits onto the table.

"*Aliha sel valle volgoth?*" she asked, with a suggestive smile.

As she centered the muzzle of the heavy blaster in the square of his chest, Trep held out his hands in surrender. Smiling to reassure his anxious companion, he picked the nearest sabacc card, the Idiot, and showed it to her. "Mind if we play?"

Do No Harm

It all seemed pretty straightforward the day I was called into Commander Briessen's office. "Temporary detached duty," he called it. Naturally, I wondered what kind of detached duty a hospital ship medic warranted, but I didn't have to wonder very long -- only until Lieutenant Haslam showed up.

I have to say he didn't look like a topnotch commando. A couple of centimeters taller than I, light brown hair thinning on top, pale blue eyes, roundish face, slender build; he looked like an accountant. But everyone in the Rebellion knew his reputation by then. What could he possibly want with me?

I found out in short order. Gebnerret Vibrion, the political head of another Rebel cell, had been captured by the Imps and was undergoing interrogation on Selnesh, a notorious prison planet in the Irishi sector. He knew too much to be left in custody; he had to be either broken out or killed quickly. Okay, I could understand that. I hadn't been with the Rebellion very long, but even I knew that given enough time, anyone could and would break under interrogation: physical torture, drugs, threats to loved ones -- everyone has a breaking point. So where did a medic come into the picture? It turned out Vibrion was a rather elderly human male with Zithrom's syndrome, a kidney problem requiring him to take continuous doses of Clondex in order to stay alive. It was a pretty sure bet the Imps wouldn't be taking tender care of his medical problems. Even worse, before he died he'd go into delirium. And who knew what secrets he'd give away then?

So I reported to the mission briefing with no small amount of apprehension. I hadn't joined the Rebellion for a life of adventure; I'd signed on to save lives. (Skies, that sounds pompous. It's more accurate to say I'd signed on for a steady job doing what I'm good at, for the benefit of the Good Guys.) I felt even more out of place when I met the other team members, commandos all: Melenna, a tiny, cheerful, exquisitely beautiful woman with a cap of loose golden curls and the coldest blue eyes I've ever seen; Gowan, a big dark guy, definitely the strong silent type; Enkhet, a tall, skinny, pale kid whose appearance fairly screamed "slicer;" Liak, a (relatively) small Wookiee with long golden-brown fur and an almost palpable aura of calm about him; and Haslam, regarding us all with his coolly analytical gaze.

"The plan," he said after a long moment, "is to get in, get Vibrion, and get out as quietly as possible. We're not going to take down the Interrogation Center; we're not going to slaughter Imps; we're not out for glory. We're gonna get Vibrion. Period."

His tone of voice was making me uneasy. "Get him in what sense?" I asked.

"In whatever sense we have to," Haslam replied calmly. "If we can evacuate him, fine. If we can't, we can give him a quicker and easier death than the Imps will, and we can keep him from talking. Have you got a problem with that, *Doctor* Leith?" He stressed the title just a little.

Actually, I did. I could see his point: burdened with a nonambulatory rescuee, there was almost no chance the team would make it out intact. On the other hand, I was a doctor, and my job was to do everything I could to save my patient. I kept my mouth shut for the moment, but the twisting sensation in the pit of my stomach was picking up considerably.

"So," he addressed the others. "Basic very-dumb-orphan scoop-and-run -- you've done it a hundred times. We infiltrate the center incognito -- Melenna, Liak, you're the prisoners; standard smugglers-suspected-of-Rebel-sympathies scenario. Gowan and Enkhet are stormtrooper guards, I'm the officer in charge. Aurin--" he turned to me, "you'll have to be another prisoner. You're taking passage with Melenna and Liak to Sestooine, you've been picked up by mistake, and you don't know anything about anything. Just keep your mouth shut and you'll do fine. How much equipment will you need to bring?"

Luckily I'd had the foresight to think this out ahead of time. "I can manage with one medpac," I replied a little shortly. "I'll need to pack it with extra Clondex and some special equipment."

"Good. We'll get to the prison sector, find out where he is, then get rid of the guards and break into his cell. Once we get in, your job is to get him alert and moving quickly if at all possible. If you can't, we'll have to ... break out without him." The others nodded casually; I had the feeling his hesitation was entirely for my benefit. "Once he's up, we get back to the shuttle. For this part, we'll take the repair access tunnels." He touched a button on the tabletop console, and a holographic schematic of an Imperial-style installation leaped out of the

center of the table; another adjustment, and a series of passages were outlined in red. The route from the prison cells to the docking bays was long, tortuous, and confusing.

Melenna chuckled. "This is where Liak comes in. His people are tree-dwellers; he can find his way through any strange maze of branches with never a wrong turn. For some reason it works on space stations as well. We don't understand it, but we don't argue with it."

"The tractor beam's just a single," Haslam continued. "Weak design -- says they don't think anyone can escape. Gowan, you'll break into the main computer and disengage it while our medic here is fixing Vibrion. At full power and with some of Enkhet's fancy shiphandling, we should be able to break free long enough to make the jump to hyperspace. Questions'?"

If anyone else had any, they weren't admitting it; the only response was a series of crisp nods from the other team members. I had one, and it was bothering me enough that I didn't even react to the interesting fact that Gowan and not Enkhet was the computer jock. Haslam looked at me sharply, but only said, "Okay, dismissed. We'll meet outside the shuttle at 0600 tomorrow, bay 36. Get some sleep, everyone. Aurin, stay a moment, please."

Once we were alone, I said, "You left something out of the briefing. What if I can't get him moving? I don't think you mean for us to just go off and leave him alive. Who gets to do the dirty deed?"

"Frankly, I'd rather have a medical droid along," Haslam said coolly. "Put a glitch in its programming, and it does exactly what the mission calls for and it doesn't develop any moral scruples at the last minute. Unfortunately, Emdees are expensive. Human medics are a lot cheaper and easier to replace."

"Nice to know I'm expendable," I murmured under my breath. Haslam ignored the comment, but after a moment some of the coldness faded from his face, leaving a look of -- almost -- helplessness.

"Aurin, I don't get any thrill out of killing. I've got a job to do here, just like you. The fact is, we can't leave him to die at the hands of the Imperials, or of his disease. And it's not just because of the information he'll spill. Interrogation is ... well, not a pleasant way to die. I want to get him out as much as you do, but

it may not be possible. The question is, if it comes to that -- can you give him something to make it quick and easy for him?"

"You're asking me to kill him. I can't do that." If I was sure of nothing else in this confusion, I was sure of that much. Apart from any other considerations, I'd sworn an oath before they let me out of the Byblos Academy of Medicine: boiled down, it consisted of *'First, do no harm.'*

Haslam wasn't surprised. "Okay," he sighed, "it's my responsibility. I'll take care of it." Then, in a whisper, "Blast it, I wish they wouldn't do this to me."

I hesitated. I didn't like the train of thought developing in my mind: *Look, if the guy's gonna die anyway, isn't it your job as a physician to make sure it's as easy as possible? If we can't get him out, Haslam is gonna shoot him. If you can't square your conscience enough to overdose him with potassium and make it fast and painless, can you at least sedate him enough so he sleeps through it?*

But that means I'm helping Haslam kill him. I'm being dragged along on this mission to save his life if it's at all possible, not to help end it. You're on this mission to serve your patient as best you can, whether it means saving his life or helping him die as easily as possible.

Skies, I hate this!

"I can give him some conergin," I heard myself saying abruptly. I was dimly surprised to hear that my voice was flat, steady; my insides certainly weren't. "It won't kill him, but it'll put him down deep enough to let you do what you have to."

Haslam looked up sharply. "You'll help me?"

"I'll help you. But only after I've tried everything I can to get him moving and out of there. And this is a medical problem, not a military one. It has to be my decision. Not yours." I held his eyes with my own, feeling sick. "If that's not acceptable, you and the Rebellion can find yourselves another medic. Or a droid."

"Done," Haslam replied, grasping my wrist as if closing a business deal. Which, of course, we were.

* * *

The flight to Selnesh was relatively short, only four days in hyperspace. Of course, four days with the dilemma I had hanging over my head is an eternity and then some. I spent them packing and repacking my medpac for greatest efficiency, mentally reviewing the resuscitation plan, and getting used to the weight of the hold-out blaster up my left sleeve. Melenna had handed it to me just after boarding as a matter of course.

"Wait!" I'd blurted. "I don't want this. I don't even know how to use it."

"Real simple." Melenna shrugged. "Point and shoot."

"But I don't want it! I'm a doctor! I don't shoot people!"

"This go-around, you may have to." Disgustedly, Melenna pushed up my tunic sleeve, fastened the little holster around my forearm, and snapped it down with a final-sounding click. "If you can't, don't. Just try not to shoot any of us, okay?"

We popped back into normal space over Selnesh about the midafternoon of the fourth day. If I'd set out to build a prison planet from the core outward, this would have been it: a gray rocky ball in the middle of nowhere, its sun no more than a bright bluish star. "Bleak" did not even begin to describe it. The surface was totally bare of color or vegetation. The sterile white plasteel dome of the prison sat like a fungus directly below us as we descended. There was literally nowhere else to go on this world that would support life for more than a few hours. I could see why nobody escaped from here.

While Enkhet, already in his stormtrooper armor, exchanged code strings and pleasantries with the docking bay, the rest of us lined up in preparation for deception. Melenna wore free-trader's gear, Liak only his fur, and I a plain civilian tunic and trousers; the precious medpac was fastened around my waist under the loose, long tunic. All three of us wore wrist binders. Gowan, also in armor, held a blaster rifle carefully pointed at the floor. Haslam was in a gray officer's uniform and looked, at least to me, thoroughly official and intimidating.

The jar of landing in the bay was slight; evidently Enkhet was as good a pilot as everyone said he was. I clenched my fists tightly, the cut of the binders into my wrists announcing, *I don't like this. I want to go home. Right now. I'm not cut out for a life of adventure.* Somehow sensing my nervousness, Liak turned around and growled something incomprehensible but reassuring-sounding.

"Pretend you're in a holovid," Melenna suggested brightly. "Playing the part of a prisoner. That's what I do. Just don't say anything. Let the Lieutenant do the talking -- it's what he's here for."

"Thanks," I muttered. Nerves always take me in the stomach, and mine was turning somersaults just then. Better the stomach than the hands, anyway - a doctor had better have steady hands, whether she's nervous or not.

Enkhet joined us from the cockpit. "All clear," he announced casually. "No challenge. They sound bored."

"Good enough," observed Haslam. "Let's move out."

* * *

Getting past the docking bay was a lot easier than I'd expected. Haslam, doing a perfect imitation of an Imperial officer -- clipped speech, formal stance and all -- identified himself as one Lieutenant Grallant, operating number 13398247, and us as smugglers and possible Rebel sympathizers. The base commander, who looked as if he'd heard it all one too many times before, waved us tiredly back toward the passage I figured had to lead to the holding area.

We filed down the gray hallway, ending up in a large bay with cell-lined hallways branching off at regular intervals. The central computer bank was inhabited by four stormtroopers holding blaster rifles at least as big as the ones Enkhet and Gowan wielded, and a crisply pressed officer type wearing captain's insignia who looked a whole lot more alert than his commander. The officer glanced up as we came in, and the troopers all shifted slightly to aim their rifles not precisely at us but definitely in our direction. I suddenly found it harder to breathe. Part of my brain was seriously considering saying "Count me out, thanks, I don't want to play anymore," turning around and walking back to

the ship. Since this would have ruined Haslam's pretty scenario, and I was too frozen to move anyway, I kept still and silent.

Haslam repeated the name-rank-and-operating number business for the officer, who (thank the skies) didn't seem inclined to be challenging. Instead, he helpfully fired up the computer and assigned the three of us cell numbers. Prisoner processing apparently took place inside the cells, rather than in the open area -- to reduce the incidence of breaks, I guessed. Since a break was precisely what we had planned, I didn't find this information encouraging.

Enkhet pressed the muzzle of his blaster into my back, pushing me forward. Captain Whoever stepped forward to help get us hardened criminals into cells for processing. Haslam stopped him with an upraised hand.

"I'm going to have to ask you and your men to leave for a few minutes."

"What?" the captain asked blankly.

"I need you and your men to leave the area temporarily." Haslam spoke even more quietly, with an air of complicity. "I'm with Intelligence. We suspect these prisoners have had access to top-secret information about the movements of various Rebel cells. It's not that we don't trust a loyal Imperial officer, but the presence of these prisoners here has to be kept absolutely top secret until interrogation is complete. I'm sure you understand."

"Does Commander Caton know about this?"

"No, and it's important to the war effort that no one knows just now. I can't tell you any more. I shouldn't even have said this much. The reason I brought them here is because I know the reputation of this base's officers and men. There's no more secure place in the galaxy."

"I understand," the captain said gravely, and motioned the troopers to follow him out the door. Evidently flattery went a long way.

"I'll also have to disable the security cameras temporarily. Just until they're processed, you understand. No one must know of their presence here."

"Understood." And it was as easy as that. The Imps simply walked out and closed the doors behind them. Gowan, helmet off, was already slicing into the

computer; after a moment, the cameras mounted around the ceiling went dark.

Haslam moved lightly around the room checking for I didn't know what, while Enkhet removed our binders. Melenna stretched her arms and hands forward to remove the stiffness. "You didn't have to tighten them quite so much," she complained mildly. "My hands are asleep."

"You're the one who wanted to be convincing."

Liak growled an admonishment, and the squabble -- probably the latest chapter in an ongoing saga -- ceased. Meanwhile, I was digging into my medpac again, assuring myself one more time that none of the precious equipment or drug vials were damaged. The ticklish clenching of my muscles, the usual prelude to a full-bore resuscitation, was beginning to push through my fear. "Where is he?" I demanded.

"I'm looking," Gowan replied absently, his attention entirely occupied by the flashing images on the screen. "Okay, here it is. Cell 2826."

"Well, come on, let's go!"

"Aurin," Haslam spoke quietly. "I'm in command of this mission. We go when I say."

"Haslam," I said in the same tone, "you got us past the Imps. Now it's a medical mission. That's my department, remember? There's a man dying in one of these cells. I've got work to do. Let me do it." The words "or else" hung in the air. I didn't know quite what "or else" would involve, but Haslam realized I was serious anyway. He half-laughed, half-sighed, and gave the move-out signal.

The cell was at the far end of the center hallway. While Enkhet stood guard near the hall entrance -- Gowan had stayed behind to compute some more -- Haslam entered a complex code into the keypad at the side of the door. It slid open to reveal a thin, gray-haired human male lying on the pallet at the far end of the small room. He rose half up on one elbow, eyes widening at the sight of us. I absorbed details as I moved quickly to his side, unstrapping the medpac from around my waist: he was very pale, his eyes sunken and his lips dry, indicating dehydration, but he was awake, alert and aware. I'd been prepared

for a patient at death's door, and was surprised at how relatively good he looked.

"Is this the rescue party?" His voice was soft and hoarse, but held a hint of wry humor.

"That's us." Melenna had followed close behind me, and gave him a dazzling smile I suspected would get any man off a deathbed in short order. She'd probably intended it that way. "Anything to make the mission a success," she'd commented briefly during the ride in. If flirting with the rescuee would help, she'd do it.

"I wasn't ... expecting you." He had to breathe in the middle of the short sentence; yes, he needed some help. During the exchange I had been rapidly unpacking my equipment; now I placed the IAU -- Intravenous Access Unit -- on his upper chest and pressed the activation switch. While the catheter burrowed through his skin in search of the large subclavian vein leading directly to his heart, I opened two ampules of Clondex, one of endogenous steroid, a cordine patch, and a liter of serum-replacement solution, and laid them down ready to hand. Liak crouched beside me, ready to help if needed; Haslam stayed alert at the door.

"Hey," Melenna remarked, "never underestimate the power of a woman."

"You're in better shape than I thought you'd be," I commented as I worked.

"I had three vials of ... Clondex when I got here ... been underdosing myself. I only ... ran out two days ago."

"How'd you get them past the body search?" Melenna demanded.

"Swallowed them." Weak as he was, Vibrion winked at her. Melenna followed this statement to its logical conclusion and grimaced; funny, I wouldn't have thought her the squeamish type. I ran the scanner over his body, noting the small heart -- another sign of dehydration -- and the shrunken kidneys and adrenals, which went along with the Zithrom's. Blood pressure was a little low, heart rate a little fast, but otherwise everything looked pretty normal. I allowed myself a sigh of relief. *This isn't going to be as bad as I thought, thank*

the skies. And remember, the next time Briessen wants to send you out on one of these things, say no.

The IAU clicked, and a backflow of darkish venous blood appeared in its access chamber, indicating the catheter was in the vein. I injected the first unit of Clondex and the steroid rapidly, then started feeding in the serum solution as fast as I could. I had to be careful here; giving a large volume of fluid too fast could tip him over the other way into lung and kidney failure.

"How're we doing?" Haslam asked. "We've gotta move out soon."

"I need a few more minutes. Have they caught on to us?"

"No sign yet," he said, "but let's not push our luck. Liak, go open the access tunnel entrance and stand by." Liak lumbered up from my side and out the door, ruffling my hair with his big paw as he passed.

The fluid bag was nearly empty; I squeezed it to get the last few drops into my patient, then disconnected it. Already Vibrion was looking better, his eyes less sunken and color coming back into his face. I gave him the second round of Clondex, then slapped the cordine patch onto his neck. He flushed red, a hand going shakily to his forehead as the stimulant took hold.

"The headache will pass in a minute," I said. "This'll help you keep up. We need to get out of here. Can you sit up?"

Vibrion nodded, wincing as I helped him to a sitting position and rechecked his blood pressure; it was holding steady. So far, so good. "Liak's got the tunnel open," Haslam said, calmly but with a note of underlying urgency in his voice. I hauled Vibrion to a standing position. Melenna stepping in to get a shoulder under his arm for support, and rechecked the scanner's readings; his pulse had gone up 10 beats per minute to compensate for the change in body position, but blood pressure remained stable.

"Okay?" I asked him.

"Okay." He smiled wanly. "Let's go."

* * *

The access tunnel ran parallel along the hallway, a brightly lit, dusty passage just tall enough to stand up in (Liak and Enkhet had to slouch) and just wide enough for one. Melenna, Vibrion and I, linked in the tail position, shuffled sideways. Liak led, followed by Enkhet and Gowan; Haslam was in the middle, where he could monitor everyone at once. It was slow going, with a couple of back-up-and-start-over maneuvers at first. I hadn't the slightest idea where we were going, and wasn't sure if I cared. I'd done what I came to do, and the post-code ebb of unused adrenaline had left me drained, flat, and hungry. Melenna, on the other hand, was looking keyed-up and nervous.

"This is taking too long," she hissed at Haslam, just ahead of her. "How long do you think it'll be before the Imps figure out something's up? They're not all idiots, you know."

"I'm aware of that, Melenna," Haslam said with careful calm. "It's only been 11 minutes. We have time." Eleven minutes? How could it only have been 11 minutes? It felt like hours since I'd walked into that cell.

Liak grunted something from the head of the line, and we kept shuffling along. I glanced repeatedly up at Vibrion, reassessing his condition; after a few minutes he was dripping sweat -- it was hot in the tunnel -- and noticeably paler as the cordine flush wore off, but he gently squeezed my shoulders and kept moving. It occurred to me that fragile as the old man appeared, anyone who -- at his age, and burdened by chronic illness -- could found and run an entire cell of the Rebellion had to be tougher than tempered titanium. He was certainly proving it now.

After a long few minutes more of this business, we all stopped at a signal from Liak: we were nearing the docking bay. The plan was to throw a concussion grenade into the bay while we remained under cover in the tunnel; with the guards incapacitated and the tractor beam hopefully deactivated, we would scurry to our stolen shuttle, take off, and evade pursuit long enough to complete the run-to-jump for hyperspace.

At least, that was the theory.

We all crouched down on the dusty floor of the tunnel, except Vibrion, who sat down rather suddenly, as if his legs would no longer hold him. Melenna

propped him up against the wall while I scrabbled in the medpac for another cordine patch. I wasn't sure of the wisdom of giving him another round -- it might send him into heart failure -- but I wanted it handy if he did need it. A flash of white caught the corner of my eye at the far curve of corridor, and I glanced up.

A stormtrooper, flattened against the curving wall, was just edging around the corner, blaster up and pointed directly at me.

Ambush, I thought, very coldly and clearly, as time slowed to a halt around me. I couldn't seem to get in a breath -- the nauseated stunned emptiness was almost exactly what I'd felt at age six, after falling off a balcony flat onto my stomach. But my mind, trained to function logically in a crisis, kept clicking right along: *There isn't time to warn Haslam. You're blocking the others -- they can't shoot around you. If you fall, Vibrion is next in line.*

You've got a blaster.

My right hand pulled the little hold-out blaster from its holster under my left sleeve, leveled it at the trooper, and fired. The shot angled upward just enough to pass between the breastplate and the bottom of the helmet; it took him square in the throat, and he let out a choked gurgle and dropped to his knees. His helmet flew off as he went down, allowing me a brief glimpse of a very young man, light brown hair damp with sweat and clinging to his skull, clear gray eyes wide in amazement, before he toppled flat onto his face.

I had just time to be amazed that I'd actually hit him before I was surrounded by blaster shots: Haslam and the others had caught on to the fact that something was going on behind us, and were shooting over my head in a perfectly choreographed blast-and-duck pattern that said they'd been in situations like this before. The rest of the troopers, their cover blown, had moved around the corner into the open and were blasting away at us. I started to turn back, with some confused idea of shielding Vibrion with my body, but Melenna hissed at me, "Stay down!"

Her statement was punctuated by a dull, but extremely loud, explosion from the direction of the docking bay that shook the walls around us. I swallowed to equalize the pressure in my ears and got off a couple of random shots toward

the troopers, at the same time groping behind me with my left hand for Vibrion's wrist. His pulse was rapid and slightly irregular, but strong; he squeezed my hand in weak reassurance.

During all this, I'd forgotten to try to breathe again. I gasped, and air rushed into my lungs, making me suddenly dizzy. I dropped my forehead onto my wrist; curled awkwardly in a semi-fetal position on the floor, there wasn't much else I was capable of. I stayed there, clutching Vibrion's hand, until someone sharply wrenched at my shoulder.

"Come on!" a voice shouted roughly. "We're going!"

I looked up to see Gowan bending over me, helmet off and a charred crease of blaster burn slanting across his forehead where a bolt had winged him. He grasped my wrist, hauled me to my feet, and slung me forward toward the docking bay. Behind us lay only a heap of white armor, the gray-eyed boy hidden beneath his comrades. The floor of the bay was similarly littered with the limp bodies of troopers and officers, all knocked unconscious simultaneously by the blast of Liak's concussion grenade. Haslam, at the entrance waiting for us, grabbed my arm and dragged me up the shuttle ramp just behind Melenna and Vibrion; he was leaning heavily on her shoulder, knees buckling and plainly on the verge of collapse. Gowan, following us in, hit the door latch and headed for the cockpit at a dead run; the engines were already roaring in startup sequence. Haslam dumped Vibrion and me onto the passenger seat, rapidly strapped us in, then turned to follow Melenna aft.

"Where are you going?" I gasped.

"To man the guns," he flung back over his shoulder, not missing a step.

"Guns? I thought shuttles didn't have guns!"

No answer but the jolting rise of the craft; then we were flung backwards by the steep drag of acceleration as the shuttle shot forward. The next few minutes were a rough approximation of a whirling repulsorlift ride I'd gone on once during a Coruscant Fete Week: moving straight up, down, sideways, in a corkscrew, and several less-conceivable directions, all at breakneck speed, in pitch darkness (the cabin lights had gone out during the second high-speed maneuver), and this time with the added thrill of people shooting at us. I could

dimly hear Haslam and Melenna's casual crosstalk as they shot back; evidently this shuttle did have guns. Vibrion was too far away for me to reach, but sat crumpled in his restraints, his eyes sunken again into his head but sparkling. People say emergency medics are excitement junkies, but this was getting ridiculous. Haslam was right about Enkhet's piloting, though; even I could tell he was doing a superb job of keeping us in one piece. Finally the ride turned into a high-gravity Aurin sandwich, pressing the breath out of my lungs as the shuttle made the star-stretching jump to hyperspace.

The next few minutes were a blur, as I got Vibrion settled more comfortably and gave him some more fluid and another half-dose of Clondex. Haslam had taken a blaster shot to the left shoulder, which had managed to miss the great vessels and nerve plexus; I cleaned and dressed his and Gowan's wounds. Melenna, who'd been in plain view of the troopers and without armor or any other form of protection, didn't have a scratch on her.

"That's why we keep her around," Enkhet quipped cheerfully, strolling into the common room from the cockpit. "She's our luck." Melenna thumped him lightly on the top of the head with a derisive chuckle, and Enkhet tugged teasingly on a curling golden strand.

I finished Haslam's dressing and was halfway through repacking the medpac, thinking a hot drink sounded like a good idea, when the shakes hit. I always get a little trembly after a code: usually it passes off after a few seconds, but this time it got steadily worse. I knelt on the deckplates in the corner of the common room, face turned to the wall, while the ugly, jeering thoughts crawled around in my brain.

You shot that trooper: You killed him. I thought you were supposed to be a doctor, remember?

I had to! It was him or us.

Yeah, right. All that pious moralizing about your oaths, and do no harm, and the sanctity of sentient life -- and none of it really meant anything, did it?

It wasn't 't just me, not just my own life. I had a patient to protect. I had the whole group to protect.

Oh, come off it! You had to protect them? Who appointed you Hero of the Universe? Face it -- you can mouth off all you want to about morality, but when it comes right down to it, you took a life. You're not a healer, you're a killer.

"Aurin?"

A hand touched my shoulder, and I turned. Gowan knelt next to me, looking tired and battered and absurdly young, open concern in his dark eyes. I just looked at him, unable to get any words around the hessa-ball that had suddenly taken up residence in my throat.

"You know," he said slowly, "you did a good job in there."

"I killed him." A deep breath let me speak, but couldn't keep the tremor out of my voice.

"I know. And I'm sorry you had to ... but I can't say I'm sorry you did." His voice was even, quiet. "Listen to me. Aurin ... this is a war. The point of war is that if you can kill enough of the people on the other side, they'll quit. That's a hard thing to live with. What's even harder is, sometimes people get caught up in the killing who don't really belong there. And I think you're one of those people."

"You can say that again." A shaky half-laugh, half-sob escaped me. "I'm supposed to keep people alive, not ... this."

"Exactly. And that's what makes what you did today so valuable. The Rebellion doesn't have anything like as many troops as the Empire does. If we can't stay alive long enough to win this war, we've thrown our lives away. Look at it this way: you helped keep all of us alive a little longer to fight this thing. And you kept Vibrion alive, and that's even more important, just because of who he is. Because. he can bring in others who believe what we're doing is right."

I hadn't expected such gentleness, such eloquence out of this dark man who had barely spoken during the entire mission. The hard knot in my throat promptly dissolved into tears. Gowan put an awkward arm around my shoulders as I cried hot tears of shame, of self-recrimination, of grief, and of sheer reaction to the events of the day.

The tensions and pain gradually drained out of my body along with the tears. After a few minutes I simply stopped crying and slumped exhausted against the wall, dashed my sleeve across my eyes and smiled shakily up at Gowan.

"I'm okay now. Really," I added at his doubtful look. "Sorry I cried all over you. I'd just ... like to be alone for a while."

He nodded and stood up. "Do you want anything? A drink?"

"Not now, thank you."

He nodded and moved forward toward the cockpit. "Gowan?"

He turned.

"Thanks."

He nodded again and walked away. I just sat there for a while, eyes closed, mind drifting. For the most part, I'd done what I came to do. I'd gotten Vibrion out of the prison alive; I'd made it out myself, and so had the rest of the team. And if all that was partly due to my having violated my oath to do no harm ... well, maybe allowances could be made for having done a wrong thing for a right reason. Maybe the pretty rules of medicine don't hold up as well in war. Either way, there was nothing I could do about it now ... except to wish that gray-eyed boy oneness with the Force that binds us all, and to go on with my life and my job as best I could. I sighed, got up -- aching like the aftermath of a stun blast -- and went in search of that hot drink.

They gave me a medal when we got back -- the Field Achievement Award, the one they give all the field operatives who make it back from their first mission. I still have it. I threw it in a drawer and haven't looked at it since. But like a half-healed wound, I always know it's there.

The Capture of *Imperial Hazard*

Madame Mon Neela was not safe, not even in the security-tight bases from which she was being constantly relocated. The Rebels' continuous struggle to keep their leaders' locations hidden from the Empire was becoming as difficult as their attempts had been during the Great Purge to hide the Jedi Knights.

Despite their best efforts during those dark times, the Knights had been all but extinguished.

The Rebels were determined that the same fate would not befall their experienced war strategists and leaders, or their cause was surely lost.

Mon Neela, a former assistant barrister general of the Old Republic, was among those at highest risk. She hardly seemed a militarist, with her lovely face and kind eyes. The face that had been beautiful in youth was still attractive, but it had mellowed by mid-life into softer, gentler lines. Judging her with only a glance, no one would ever have thought her a great leader. But when she spoke, her voice possessed such authority that those who listened followed.

Her political profile had always been high. In the Senate, when Senator Palpatine had begun to exceed the polite rules of the Council, she had protested. Now she was a strategist of the Rebel Command, her battle tactics were renowned, her dedication to the Rebel cause without question ... and Palpatine wanted her dead.

"We have a ship, Neela, but we haven't much time," explained the Bothan, Polo Se'lab, her Senate contemporary and now a general of the Rebellion. Urgently he thrust an atmospheric oxygen mask and a shoulder cloak into her hands. "These will conceal your identity until you're safely off Horob. Now that this world's natives know that the Empire has found us here, they are no longer friendly."

Neela made an impatient sound and pushed the disguise back into his hands. "I have no need of these. I'm staying! Listen to me! This base is made up of physicists and engineers, with a few soldiers to protect them. A band of barely protected scientists working on computer and droid sensors, Polo! There aren't enough troops here to withstand a full Imperial assault. The field commanders need me. Without me, they are unprepared for --"

"Neela!" Se'lab's upper lip curled in frustration. He drew a deep breath to regain control of his temper, and continued. "Don't make my tasks more difficult. The troops on this world are not alone in needing you. It seems unlikely we'll have time to evacuate before the Imperials arrive. If we are taken

your experience will be needed on other worlds, other bases. We can't afford to lose you."

Neela's even expression didn't alter, her posture became no more or less rigid, but something undefinable signaled her even greater defiance. "My sons died for this Rebellion," she answered. "My own life has been dedicated to it, and yet I am continually being asked to run away. Not this time -- I will see *this* battle through."

Neela's guard, Stasheff -- a handsome young man, despite the habitual sternness of his expression -- stood a pace behind her. He could not see her face, but he watched Se'lab curiously, expecting to see him wilt beneath Neela's persuasive rhetoric.

But the Bothan was used to (and impervious to) Neela's oratory prowess. "What do you think, Madame?" he challenged. "That I make this request of you lightly? That what I do, I do out of disregard for this unit? If you are as concerned about it as you claim, then you'll leave now and let *me* try to save it. You can do no more here. Think again where your loyalties lie. Are they with the Alliance, or are they more self-serving than even you realize? Is it honor you seek now?"

Neela glared defiantly at her old comrade, then reluctantly glanced at the garments he again offered.

The Bothan gave a sigh of relief as she took them. "The natives are afraid; some threaten to fight against us when the Imperials come. Hysteria has brought things to this impasse, but it is not beyond repair. I'll redeem what I can."

Neela didn't look at him as she swirled the cape around her shoulders and donned the mask. "Fight for it then," she insisted. "We didn't struggle so hard and so long to see our goal shattered now. *Fight* for it!"

Se'lab extended his hands to Neela in the human gesture of friendship. As she accepted them, he slipped a data chip, no larger than a speck, into her palm.

She glanced in surprise at him, then turned the tiny chip between her finger tips. "This is the sensor under development here for--?"

"Yes." Se'lab closed her fingers around the chip, then covered her hands with his own. "It's all I have to send with you, and I'm afraid it isn't much. It's only experimental, but the scientists are very proud of its potential." He gave her an encouraging smile and released her hands, stepping back a pace.

"If you please, Madame," Stasheff urged, "we haven't much time."

"May the Force be with you," Se'lab said. "I'll do what I can."

As Neela and Stasheff emerged from the crumbling stone building that housed a medical clinic for the planet's poor (and only recently the clandestine operations of the Rebel Alliance), it seemed that a celebration was in progress. But it took only seconds to recognize the riotous commotion as far from jubilant. A contingent of the planet's natives, realizing that their city would soon be invaded by the Empire, were in violent turmoil. The Rebels had come offering a better future, and the Horobians had been willing to fight for it -- or so they claimed. But now the Empire was coming, and the idealistic Rebel words seemed more like a death sentence. Through the chants and shouts of the people, Neela recognized her name. They were shouting for her release -- calling for her to be given to the Empire in atonement for their own treason.

Stasheff hurried Neela around the side of the dilapidated building and rushed her into a waiting airspeeder.

The roar of the engines drowned out the sound of the crowd; as the small craft became airborne, Neela slumped against the seat. Until the moment Se'lab insisted she leave, she'd desperately hoped for this particular unit. There weren't many soldiers on Horob. The best ground troops and X-wing pilots were situated where the fighting was heaviest and the threats most severe. By comparison, the troops protecting the base scientists on Horob were few, but they were among the bravest she'd encountered. Now when she closed her eyes, she saw their young idealistic faces and despaired at how many would be lost when the Imperials arrived.

Bitter tears stung her eyes and she allowed herself private grief. The Rebellion had become her existence; any chance she might have had for normalcy had been swallowed up in her fervent desire to see the Empire overthrown and the Republic restored. Now she wondered if she had been tragically idealistic.

Stasheff piloted in silence, his attention riveted on the flight path and surveillance instruments that would alert him if they were being followed. But despite the nervousness that prickled his spine, he knew they were not being tracked. The Imperials were hours away, and the Horobians -- still at the beginnings of industrialization -- hadn't yet developed transportation beyond primitive ground cars.

After a short time Stasheff set the airspeeder down on an empty expanse of field.

Their escape ship waited, fired and ready to go. It was a glaringly incongruous private yacht, painted in pleasant, unmilitary shades of blue; the name *Starcrossed* was painted in elegant, slanting letters on its side. The ship's avian-like lines had been designed for beauty, not wartime efficiency.

The ship's human captain, Heedon, waiting impatiently outside, looked ready for a jaunty mid-afternoon cruise, not a desperate Rebel escape. His hair was slicked back and plastered tight against his head in a fashion popular with wealthy humans on several of the more financially progressive worlds. Even the smart cut of his tailored jacket and his crisply laundered trousers suggested socialite tendencies.

Neela stepped out of the airspeeder, glanced from Stasheff to the ship and her captain, and opened her mouth in protest.

"Intelligence highly recommends him," Stasheff rapidly explained. "His loyalty is with us, and no one will expect you to escape in something like this."

Neela gave the ship another doubtful look. "You may have to convince *me*, Stasheff. Does it even have shields?"

Before Stasheff could reply, Heedon advanced on them, stridently protesting. "Where have you been! My comm line says the natives are getting unfriendly! For all I know, they've followed you!" If he was awed in the presence of so renowned a Rebel as Neela, he hid it well.

"Escapes don't run on schedule," Stasheff irritably reminded him. Heedon snorted and cast an eye at Neela. "This her? She looks older in person."

Neela's brows ascended sharply.

"If you'd gone through what she has, you'd look old, too," Stasheff answered, then realizing his lack of tact, he turned to the Rebel leader, aghast.

Neela held up a hand. "Never mind. We'd better go. Once we're aboard, you can tell me our destination."

"Do you think you're cutting it close enough?" Heedon sarcastically inquired. "Or do you want to wait just a few more minutes to *really* get the adrenaline going?" He snorted, turned, and marched indignantly up the ramp.

Neela exchanged unhappy glances with her bodyguard.

* * *

As much as he hated to admit it, Heedon was beginning to understand how and why he'd allowed himself to be dragged into the Rebellion.

"Look at me," he muttered, vehemently stabbing coordinates into the computer. "Transporting a person like that! I must be out of my mind!"

But it was false grumbling. His exotic cruise business had once flourished, with aristocrats and socialites as clientele. But since Palpatine's rise to power, the aristocracy had begun to crumble on a galaxy-wide scale; many had become impoverished puppets. They still lived in their pretty houses and gave their pretty parties, but only as far as Palpatine would allow it, and only as it suited his purpose. Their wealth now belonged to the Emperor -- he bought their allegiance and maintained their pampered lifestyles in exchange for their loyalty. Terrified at the thought of losing the only way of life they understood, they'd agreed, almost to a person. Unfortunately, not many of them could afford luxury cruises anymore.

And so, as much as Heedon hated to admit it, this revolution -- this Neela -- was his cause. It didn't make him less resentful that it had to be his cause, but there it was.

* * *

"It's time you told me our destination, Stasheff." Neela thought she'd been admirably patient -- not the easiest thing for a leader of a galaxy-wide

Rebellion to be. She was accustomed to quick answers, rapid decisions, and instant solutions.

Within an hour, Stasheff had seen her patience erode into petulance.

"In light of the circumstances, Madame, General Se'lab and Intelligence thought it best that you attempt to go as far out on the Rim as you can," Stasheff explained. "Despite appearances, we have an excellent pilot, and you ..."

Neela raised an eyebrow, her expression indicating that whatever he said next had to go a long way toward meeting her approval.

Stasheff's mouth hung suspended between word and thought. "There's no where else you can safely go," he finally concluded.

She raised the other eyebrow.

"And -- well, Madame, you're too well known on sight on nearly all the worlds from holovids alone, and that being the *obvious* case, your safety is --"

"Secondary to the survival of that base," she answered, not bothering to disguise her irritation. "Stasheff, occasionally I'm astonished by your limited thinking. I left Horob as Se'lab requested. That doesn't mean I've given *up*. *He* should have realized that."

"Madame Neela!" Stasheff exclaimed. "I have my orders!"

"And I have my conscience. I refuse to run another parsec. I won't make a mockery of the Rebel blood that's been shed in this war; too much of that blood was personal."

Stasheff stared in disbelief. "With all respect, Madame, how can you possibly change that?"

"There's a way to turn every trick, Stasheff." She made a knowing expression and turned, beckoning for him to follow as she strode toward the cockpit.

Heedon was sitting at the console, feet up, his lean frame languid in the pilot's seat -- almost indolent, as though he was, indeed, transporting a vacationing tourist instead of an escaped Rebel.

"I've plotted a course for the Rim," he said without looking up or adjusting his posture. "It's going to take us forever to get there, and the next stop is probably oblivion, but what the crock, right?"

"We're not going to the Rim," Neela answered.

Stasheff's face went red with alarm. "Madame, I must protest!"

"Stasheff, *do* stop calling me that," Neela sighed. "It makes me sound old. Neela will do."

Stasheff's tongue staggered over the name, unable to articulate so familiar a sound at so profound a person. He finally stopped trying. "General Se'lab gave me implicit instructions to transport you safely to --"

"I am not subject to the orders of General Se'lab," she smoothly answered. "Nor have I ever been, and since when has the Rim been safe?" She shook her head. "You're much too young to be so rigid, Stasheff. I certainly hope it's something you'll outgrow."

Heedon thrust out a lower lip and nodded in approval.

Stasheff was appalled. "You're an escaped Rebel leader! They'll kill you if they find you!"

"I've been prepared for death since I joined the Rebellion."

Stasheff clamped his jaw shut. Heedon realized he was grinning, admiring her despite himself. "So you're not going to the Rim." He sat forward and asked in a conspiring tone. "What do you have in mind instead?"

Neela took a seat opposite him. "We're going to intercept the Imperial Star Destroyer on its way to Horob and hold them long enough to give our ground troops time to safely evacuate."

Stasheff choked.

Heedon stared at her, waiting for the punchline. When it became obvious that she had said all she meant to, he sat back in his seat and crossed his arms. "Is that all?"

"For the time being."

"You wouldn't, perhaps, care to try for something a little more challenging?"

"Oh, I think this will do to begin with."

Heedon massaged his temples delicately with his fingertips. "You're giving me a headache."

Stasheff finally found his voice. "Madame Neela, you've lost your mind!"

"Very likely," she agreed. "But, Stasheff, didn't you once tell me you were curious to see the inside of an Imperial warship?"

* * *

Heedon stared in dismay at the nav screen where the red scrawl representing an approaching Star Destroyer had just appeared. "There they are," he said, tapping the screen with an index finger. He turned in his seat and fixed Neela with an uncertain eye. "I really like the idea of living, you know? We're small - they probably haven't seen us yet. It's not too late to --"

"Just remember what I told you to do, and you'll still live to be an old man," Neela promised. She took a seat beside him to study the computer.

Stasheff braced a hand on the back of Neela's chair and glanced over her shoulder at the screen. "This is insane."

"Undeniably," Neela agreed. "I never claimed otherwise."

Stasheff was annoyed by her cheerfulness. "Madame, please. They have a ship the size of a small city, stormtroopers, war advisors, officers and heavy duty weapons. What do we have?"

Heedon fixed her with a jaundiced eye. "Don't say we've got 'truth' or I'll get sick."

Neela laughed despite herself. "Truth is the last thing we have in this particular gambit! No, gentlemen, our sabacc card in the hole will be that despite *Starcrossed's* diminutive size, she is still too large to fit into the docking bay of a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer."

Stasheff and Heedon exchanged bewildered expressions, then with a fatalistic sigh and a shrug, Stasheff glanced back at the computer. The red dot on the screen had come to rest in a steady orbit around Horob.

"We need do no more than hold the Imperials long enough for the ground troops to evacuate," Neela reminded them. "Several hours should be sufficient."

"I trust you also have a plan for getting us out alive?" Heedon asked.

"There is *always* a plan," Neela assured him. "Open a line."

Heedon stared hard at her, then transferred his gaze to Stasheff. The young guard licked his lips, hesitated, then nodded.

With a sigh, Heedon turned back to the communications board. "Imperial ship, this is the *Starcrossed*. I'm an independent entrepreneur and captain of this ship. I have a passenger aboard who wants to talk to you."

Neela leaned toward the console "Star Destroyer, this is Sayer Mon Neela of the Rebel Alliance. I order you to surrender your vessel."

The Imperial silence was understandable.

Heedon leaned toward the console. "She really means it," he offered.

Stasheff put himself in the Imperials' position, wondering how he would have responded to such an outrageous claim.

"Surrender to *you*?" came the final, incredulous reply. "Mon Neela, indeed!"

"You need only bring me aboard to prove it," Neela answered.

"*Without* any tricks," Heedon added. "I'll be over here, monitoring her the whole time. This ship's rigged to blow at the first sign of trouble. And if *Starcrossed* blows, she could take out a small moon, never mind your puny Star Destroyer."

There was a burst of laughter on the other end. "Am I to understand that you are threatening an Imperial warship?"

"Something like that," Heedon answered. "You willing to take a chance on the threat? The Alliance has got a few tricks you guys still don't know about."

"I doubt it."

"Doubt all you want, but you'll never know 'till you wake up dead. will you?"

There was an audible snort over the comm. "It's not every day we receive such an outrageous threat, and the voluntary surrender of someone on the Imperial extermination list."

"This is not a surrender," Neela answered. "Quite the reverse, sir. You are my prisoner. You may take Captain Heedon at his word when he says the ship is rigged to detonate at the first sign of aggression. I will come aboard to confer. Our ship is obviously too large to fit your docking bay. We require a docking claw and umbilical -- we will enter through the artificial corridor. Furthermore, you will see to it that the umbilical connecting our respective vessels is equipped with blast doors at each entrance to prevent invasion from either side. Take my offer or disregard it, but don't waste my time."

There was a long silence.

"Gentlebeings," Heedon finally said. "Did I mention how impatient we can be?"

The ship shuddered, rocking the deck beneath them. Neela grasped the back of Heedon's chair. "Yes, I know," she said before either Stasheff or Heedon could speak. "Tractor beam."

* * *

Captain Sergus Lanox politely extended a hand as Neela and Stasheff entered the access bay from the umbilical corridor. "Welcome aboard the *Imperial Hazard*, Madame Neela; this is quite an honor."

Sergus was a handsome man in mid-life, with a serious expression and gray eyes that were too large for his face.

Is it only that hideous uniform that makes them all look the same? Neela wondered.

She nodded without taking his hand.

"Captain Sergus Lanox at your service, and delighted to discover that it is you, after all," he continued. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person. I, like everyone else in the civilized galaxy, recognize your name because of your involvement in the old Imperial Senate." He smiled, bowed, and sardonically raised an eyebrow. "Although I daresay, more know of you now because of your traitorous inclinations. The Emperor will personally reward me for your capture."

"You have yet to capture me," Neela reminded him.

"Ah yes, of course," Sergus smiled. He straightened from his bow. "You've threatened me with your little pleasure boat. I must be careful." He grinned, not unpleasantly.

Neela indicated Stasheff with a gesture. "This is my aide, Raan Stasheff."

Lanox acknowledged the young man with the barest flicker of a gaze, then turned his attentions back to Neela. "Is he essential to our negotiations?"

"I am essential to her safety," Stasheff tightly answered.

Lanox ignored him. "If I understand correctly," he said to Neela, "your ship is your first, best assurance of safety. If that is true, then you won't mind that I have your guard removed to guest quarters or returned to your ship until our meeting is complete."

Stasheff's jaw set like stone. "Not on your--"

"Of course, Captain," Neela interrupted. She laid an encouraging, almost motherly, hand at Stasheff's collar. "I'd have it no other way."

Stasheff snapped her a disbelieving glare. "I'm not leaving this ship without you." He put a hand on the butt of his holstered blaster. The doors snapped open as though the bodyguard's action had activated them, and three stormtroopers entered, rifles drawn.

Lanox smiled wryly at Neela. "You understand that diplomacy can be carried only so far. We'll talk, Madame, but our conference will consist of two, and only two."

Stasheff cast Neela a last angry glance as he was led away.

* * *

For a time Neela sat across a feast-laden table and listened as Lanox extolled the glories of the Empire and sang the praises of Palpatine. She was almost amused; Lanox was spouting Imperial propaganda so freely that one would have thought the conference had been *his* idea. So far, Neela hadn't had an opportunity to present her own proposal.

Finally, when it seemed likely that the Imperial would carry his recitations indefinitely, she interrupted. "I am not a wholehearted admirer of the Empire, sir."

Lanox chuckled. "If you were, I would not be quite so ardent. It's never very enjoyable to preach to the already converted, Madame." He gave a genuine smile, devoid of sarcasm -- perhaps even a bit self-deprecating, Neela thought. He'd embarrassed himself by rambling on about his devotion to the Empire.

Neela was surprised and annoyed by this glimpse into his humanity; she'd grown accustomed to despising anyone in allegiance to Palpatine, particularly officers of the line. She instantly dismissed her next thought that the smile made him look almost handsome.

"I'm beginning to think you don't trust me," Lanox continued. "Considering you claim to hold my life in your hands, I'm surprised." The Imperial's smile expanded into a grin, and she saw it, then -- the mockery in his eyes.

"A military leader of the Rebellion *not* trust the commander of an Imperial warship?" she parried. "Why Captain, now it is *my* turn to be surprised."

Lanox sipped his wine. "It seems rather stupid of the Alliance to allow you to wander so far from their protection. But, I have always said they were fools."

"They had enough wisdom to destroy the Death Star."

"But they do not have enough to maintain their strength. The Rebellion is a bothersome insect to be swatted and destroyed at the Emperor's whim."

"Some insects have a poisonous sting, sir."

For the barest instant she saw admiration in his eyes, but it was quickly masked again by that infuriatingly superior gaze that made all Imperials seem to be glaring down their noses, even if they weren't.

"For your sake, Madame, I do hope whatever negotiations you have in mind meet my approval, or, threats of a suicide protectorate ship notwithstanding, you may find yourself my guest longer than you'd supposed."

"My proposal is quite simple," she answered. "Return with me to a Rebel base and turn yourself, your ship, and your crew over to the Alliance."

He gave her a look of mock disapproval. "With answers like that, you're ensuring captivity." He stood. "I'll send an armed contingent to take control of your little boat."

"The *Starcrossed* is programmed to detonate at the first unfamiliar presence."

"I doubt the Rebels would risk you so casually."

"You said it yourself -- my ship is my best assurance of safety. You haven't destroyed it or taken me hostage, have you?"

"Only because I have chosen not to. I will inform your pilot that you and your aide will be executed unless he cooperates."

Now it was Neela's turn to look disapproving. "My life and the life of my aide are nothing. Obviously, for us to have come this far, there is more at stake than a mere two lives."

Lanox lifted one hand in a show of mock resignation. "Every gambit must be tried." He studied her a moment, thinking it a great pity she'd turned against the Empire. Though he'd never before met her, he'd appreciated her cunning mind for years. Before the war, she'd been well enough known in the Old Republic to be seen on almost every daily holoreport and news broadcast, and it was usually because she'd bested some notable opponent, or somehow got the Senate around to her way of thinking.

She was really quite an attractive woman ... if one were to be attracted to Rebels, which he reminded himself he was not. "It seems we are at stalemate," he sighed. "I'll have you escorted to the detention cell."

"I think not," she answered, "Stasheff and I will return to our ship now and await your decision. Please remember that if it is the wrong one, it will be the last you make. I would be most appreciative if you would have my aide brought to me here, and then you can accompany both of us back to the umbilical corridor."

She watched as his expression alternated between uncertainty and chagrin. Finally, he glanced down at the table and picked up a long-stemmed glass. "Did you find the wine to your liking?"

"I have always appreciated fine Alderaani wine."

"Yes." He took a sip, then smiled at her over the rim of the glass. "What a pity Alderaan will make no more wine. I'll have your aide brought."

* * *

The stormtroopers escorting Neela and Stasheff back through the umbilical corridor were stopped at *Starcrossed's* hatch by Heedon and his drawn blaster rifle. "Far enough," he warned, simultaneously pounding his fist on a raised wall panel. The blast door slammed down, separating Imperials and Rebels on their respective sides.

"Just *what* did you think you were doing letting him separate us like that!" Stasheff exploded, forgetting in his anger that Neela was someone he revered.

Neela gave him a genuine smile. "Why, Stasheff, look at you! You can unbend when you try, can't you?"

Stasheff was in no mood for humor. "Look, *lady*, I was sent by some pretty blasted important people to keep you safe!"

"Well, you're certainly doing a very poor job of it." She took advantage of his momentary outraged stupor to turn to Heedon and say, "I trust you did as I asked while we were away?"

"Of course," Heedon sniffed. "I sent a message to the base on Horob, telling them to come and pick you and your Imperial prisoners up for transport. They're to send their largest ships, or even three or four."

Stasheff was beyond anger; he could barely speak. Instead he steadied himself against a console chair and hissed, "What?" He leaned as far toward her as he could across the seat, his eyes protruding. "Their *largest* ships? If the troops on Horob send a convoy of any size against that Star Destroyer, they'll be wiped out! I thought you were trying to buy those troops time, not murder them yourself!"

"Stasheff, if you please," Neela attempted.

But Stasheff wasn't listening. "We don't have the kind of ships on Horob it takes to fight a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer! At the most we've got a few X-wings! Have you forgotten that Horob is a research base?"

"Stasheff," Neela tried again, more firmly this time. "The base on Horob will never receive the message, because it will be intercepted by the *Imperial Hazard* first, then jammed. This ploy not only reinforces the lie that we are holding them captive, but it gives us more time to plot our own escape."

Stasheff gaped. "And what makes you think Lanox won't call for reinforcements when he intercepts that message?"

"If you were an Imperial Captain commanding a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer," Neela answered, "would you call your superiors and tell them you were being held hostage by a pleasure yacht?"

This boy is too much fun, Neela thought at the confused mix of emotions that flitted across Stasheff's face. She reached across the chair and took hold of his lapel. When he jerked reflexively away, she held between her thumb and forefinger a small datachip she'd taken from beneath his collar. "You didn't know it when I let Lanox take you away," she said, "but I planted this little marvel of Alliance technology beneath your collar; it recorded every detention and security code on your level." She grinned at his look of astonishment and turned the chip between her fingers. "At least I hope it did. I don't really know if it works. This is the prototype of a sensor chip that was being developed on Horob; it's only experimental, and the finished product will undoubtedly be much more sophisticated than this, but we work with what we have." She handed it to Heedon who slipped it into a slot on the comm board. "Because this is a prototype, it uses a simple receiver," she continued.

"You mean you had this planned all along?" Stasheff demanded.

"Not all along," she admitted. "Not until we left Horob."

"You're willing to risk our lives on that flimsy little piece of junk, and you don't even know if it works?"

"Risk, Stasheff," Neela quietly reminded him, "is what war is about. And besides, I wouldn't have missed seeing you forget your manners for all the worlds."

"Well," Heedon said, turning from the console, "prototype or not, what we now have scrolling up on the screen, lady and gentleman, is not only the codes for the detention cells, but all 10 of the tractor beam projectors, too."

Neela looked at Stasheff with a smile. "Thank you, Stasheff; you make a remarkably practical prisoner. Captain Heedori, will you kindly begin?"

* * *

Hazard lurched violently, spilling most of the hot drink Lanox was nursing into his computer. The Captain cursed and jumped to his feet, scowling as the machinery hissed and snapped in protest.

The holographic image of Sayer Mon Neela that Lanox had projected from the small computer wavered with the uncertainty of fouled machinery, but as the overload and protection circuits kicked in, the image once again stabilized.

Lanox pounded his fist on the comm button. "Control, what happened?"

"Sir," an uncertain voice responded, "We've lost a bit of altitude, but it's nothing serious. We're on it, sir."

"*Why* did we lose altitude?" Lanox demanded.

"Checking now, sir."

Lanox irritably closed the channel and resumed his seat, continuing to study Neela's image. Once again he was bothered by distinctly unmilitary impressions of her. She was attractive, there was no denying it. Even in holograph, her beauty -- and yes, her determination and strength of character, as well -- were apparent. How many of her enemies, he wondered, had

underestimated her? What an Imperial she'd have made! The Empire did not make it a practice to utilize women in politics or military matters, but there were the extraordinary few -- and Neela was, indeed, extraordinary. What an asset to the glory of the Empire she'd have been! And what a tragedy such a talented, intelligent woman had chosen to waste her skills on the Rebel Alliance.

Lanox transferred his gaze to the list of statistics displayed on the screen. She'd been an assistant barrister general of the Old Republic, and, therefore, one of the highest placed desk-bound law enforcement officials of the previous government. She'd been an active voice in the Senate against Palpatine, as well. Since then she'd become one of the Rebellion's chief war strategists. The computer suggested that her battle plans were responsible for a significant number of Rebel successes.

Lanox turned off the display and sat back, considering his options. Contacting Command for further instructions was out of the question. They would laugh him to scorn, and he would probably be demoted (or worse) for incompetency when he returned. Besides, if he could best Mon Neela where others had failed -- even take her prisoner -- it would be a significant victory.

He realized that once she was in the Empire's hands, her fate would not be pleasant, and that darkened his mood. But he scornfully dismissed the feelings. War was not a pleasant game, but Neela had chosen to play. Any consequences would be her own fault, not his.

His reflections were interrupted by a junior officer, who stood hesitantly in the hatch, awaiting acknowledgement.

"What is it?" Lanox demanded.

"Sir," the young man replied, "I've been sent to inform you that there is a malfunction in the security computers on the detention level."

"What kind of malfunction? Come, man, don't stand there gaping like an imbecile, out with it!"

"The computer codes appear to be confused, sir. They've started a communications loop that the technicians can't stop, and they don't know what's causing it."

"The detention level, you say?"

"Yes, sir. But, it's not confined to that vicinity. The computers throughout the entire ship are showing signs of corruption; already we've lost altitude."

"Are we falling into atmosphere?" Lanox demanded.

"Yes, sir. But the technicians are working on it, and they've told me to inform you that they should have the problem corrected soon."

"Why didn't they tell me this themselves?"

"Sir. They're preoccupied, sir." *That Rebel she-nashtah is responsible for this!* Lanox thought, and found himself irrationally amused at the thought. He had no doubt that his capable technicians would find the difficulty and set it straight. In the meantime, admiring his opponent's ingenuity would do no harm. It would, after all, be one of her last strategies of war before he (somehow) took her prisoner.

* * *

"What do you mean you don't know how to stop it?" Stasheff stood over Heedon's chair, glaring at him with all the intensity of his accumulated frustration.

"Look," Heedon snapped. "I didn't design this blasted chip. All I did was stick it in the computer and tell it to do its job. If it's got more ambitions than that, it's not my fault."

Neela sighed. "You're saying that it's retrieving and sending the information too quickly? That the Imperial computers are going into overload?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Well," she shrugged. "That's not bad. If their computers are confused, they'll still release us from the tractor beams."

"They *would*," Heedon countered, "if they could get the message straight! The problem is that the chip is reading and sending the information back into their computers several hundred times per second! `Turn off the tractor beam, turn on the tractor beam, turn off the tractor beam' ... like that."

"Oh, that's not good," Neela mused.

Stasheff glared at her. "No kidding."

"Stasheff, you're becoming insubordinate," she reproved. "Can you repair it?" she asked Heedon.

The socialite gave her an incredulous stare. "You don't expect much from a cruise director, do you? If your so-called brilliant Rebel scientists couldn't get the bugs out of this thing, how do you expect me to do it?"

"Of course," Neela answered. "Forgive me. I am accustomed to working with people who know their jobs."

Heedon wasn't sure whether he'd been insulted or commended, but there was no time to dwell on it. "We've got other problems, too."

"What a surprise," Stasheff muttered.

"The Imperial ship is losing altitude, and dragging us with it. We can't turn the tractor beam off, and we can't disengage the umbilical corridor or claw, either, which means if they go splat on that planet below, we go splat, too. And that's not all; that little electronic monstrosity is making our computers loop back on us, as well! The blast door at the umbilical hatch is wide open."

"Well close it!" Stasheff yelled.

"You want to tell me how?" Heedon growled.

"I don't care how, just do it! With that blast door up, we're wide open to Imperial attack!"

"Look, I'll say this once more," Heedon said, as though explaining complex math to a child. "I push buttons, I don't do computers."

"Can we close the door manually?" Neela demanded.

"Can't hurt to try," Heedon shrugged. Neela grasped Stasheff's shoulder and yanked him with her toward the hatch. "Stay here and see if there's anything at all you can do to stop the loop," she called to Heedon over her shoulder, "While Stasheff and I try to make the blast door drop."

Heedon watched them run down the short corridor and round a corner, where they were lost to view. Disgruntled, he turned back to the console. "Didn't I just tell her I don't do computers?" he muttered.

* * *

"Captain Lanox, there's no mistake, sir. The surveillance eye in the umbilical says their blast door is open, and they appear to be trying to close it manually."

Lanox swivelled in his chair to face his officer. "Not so strong as they've led us to believe, then." He tapped his fingers on the edge of his chair. "What is the condition of the ship?"

"We're losing altitude rapidly sir, falling closer to the planet. Engineering also reports that the power loops are creating dangerous overloads. We're in danger of implosion unless we find the originating cause, sir."

"I know the originating cause," Lanox growled. Adrenaline urged him to his feet. "Take an armed contingent of troopers and storm that corridor while their blast door is still up. I don't care about the others, but I want Mon Neela taken alive. She claims that her ship is rigged to detonate at the first illegal entry, so do not -- I repeat, do *not* -- board the ship itself!"

The officer saluted. "Understood! We'll report back via comlink when the capture is complete, sir!"

"No need," Lanox crisply answered. "I'm coming with you."

The officer looked alarmed. "Forgive me, sir, but ... but the situation is extremely dangerous, and we --"

"I intend to personally arrest that woman in the name of the Empire," he answered, then recognized himself as a liar. *She's notorious*, he thought. *She's female, and she's humiliated me. I want to best her, no more and no less.* "It is

your responsibility to keep her alive, and me protected," he continued to his officer. "Assemble your troops."

* * *

The blast door obstinately refused to budge.

"We've come too far to be defeated by something as absurd., this!" Neela protested. She clenched her teeth and kicked the door, then pounded it with a closed fist. "Drop, blast you!"

Stasheff grasped her arm. "Madame, this isn't going to work! We've got to have another plan, and we have to find it *now*! It's not going to take them long to realize we're this vulnerable, and when they do--"

An explosion of blaster fire from stormtroopers, still shielding themselves at the sides of *Hazard's* open blast door, interrupted him, impacting on the hull so close to his head that Neela could smell his singed hair.

Stasheff threw himself at Neela, wrapping his arms protectively around her as he launched both of them back into the questionable safety of the ship.

"Let me go, Stasheff!" she demanded: But still he held her. "Stasheff, *get off*!" She pushed hard and he rolled onto his back.

Neela gasped. Stasheff's tunic was saturated with blood; his eyes held a pained, dazed look she'd seen too often in the eyes of wounded soldiers. "I'm sorry, Madame," he rasped.

Neela had no time for comforts. She snatched the blaster pistol from his fingers and positioned herself at the side of the open hatch.

The whiteshells were still positioned at either side of the blast door; she saw a flash of gray uniform behind them and recognized Lanox.

"Advance!" The Imperial Captain roared. "Don't stand here protecting yourselves like children!" Impulsively, he pushed past them into the corridor, waving them forward.

He was a perfect target, and Neela had him perfectly in her sights. But in the hairbreadth's time it would have taken her to squeeze the trigger, she spared his life.

The instant following left no time for regrets. An explosion fired *Hazard* from within, rocking with violent force both ships and the unstable umbilical.

Lanox was thrown off his feet and hurled headlong even as *Hazard*'s blast doors thundered shut behind him, separating him from his troopers.

A second, immediate explosion made the Star Destroyer lurch and plunge like a wounded bird. Lanox careened off a far wall and fell, gracelessly sliding the length of the corridor into Neela at the opposite end.

They went down together in a tangle of arms and legs. Unable to regain balance, they clung to one another, eyes wide with horror as the corridor rocked and swayed, threatening to collapse with each new explosion.

After what seemed an eternity, the convulsions and noise stopped, the corridor ceased its wild vibrations and settled into a deceptively gentle sway. Ahead -- still confused by the erratic commands of the computer -- *Starcrossed*'s blast door slid quietly shut, while behind, *Hazard*'s snapped open.

For a dazed moment, Neela and Lanox gaped at one another, then Lanox shot to his feet and threw her off, bolting toward his ship as quickly as his legs would carry him.

Neela turned and threw herself onto her knees in front of *Starcrossed*'s closed portal, squeezing her fingers between the tightly sealed cracks as she tried against all hope to make it open.

The hiss of atmosphere escaping through cracks in the corridor's inner bulkhead taunted her.

"Open!" she demanded of the door from between clenched teeth. Lanox lurched onto the landing ledge of his ship, gasping for breath, bending at the waist to brace his hands on his knees. Around him, emergency klaxons blared, his crew scrambled and screamed to one another as they fought to save their dying vessel.

But through the overwhelming confusion and noise, it was the sound of Neela at the end of the corridor, cursing the blast door, the Empire, and his own name, that caught all of Lanox's attention.

He straightened, turned, and saw her on her knees, still struggling to open the door to her ship before the inner bulkhead breached. *This is your chance, fool!* he thought. *You should have taken her when you had the opportunity! Capture her now, take her back to the Emperor, and redeem yourself from this debacle. But can I? The bulkhead in that corridor will blow at any moment!* He squared his shoulders and gathered what remained of his courage. *Better to take the chance and die here, than to return to the Emperor, defeated by this Rebel. His Majesty's punishment would be far worse.*

Cautiously, he stepped back into the corridor, edged his way along one creaking wall, and stepped up beside Neela, laying a firm hand on her shoulder.

She glanced sharply up, all fear evaporated from her face. Only anger and resentment remained, as though she had resigned herself to her destiny, but would not give fate the satisfaction of her fear.

Conflict and inexplicable guilt roiled in Lanox's chest as he stared down at her - long-time admiration of her battling with his loyalty to the Empire. He was humiliated to realize that, enemy or not, she had more courage than he would ever have.

Before he realized his own changed intentions or even fully knew what he was doing, he was on his knees beside her, forcing his fingers into the cracks of the door, grimacing with the effort to force it open.

Neela glared. "Why are you helping me?"

"Madame," he grunted, pausing only long enough to glare back. "With all due respect, this is hardly the time for questions. This is *your* escape. Would you care to assist me?"

Under the strength of their combined efforts, the door catch finally gave way and it flew open with a forceful *snap!*

Lanox shot to his feet, dragging Neela with him. He grasped her shoulders and pulled her toward him for a full, generous kiss. "My payment," he explained, then he spun the flabbergasted Rebel forward and thrust her through the hatch into the safety of her ship.

The corridor gave another dramatic groan and a corner of the bulkhead ripped violently apart. The sudden decompression sucked the duty cap off Lanox's head and out the aperture, swirling his hair, whipping his uniform tunic.

Neela clutched a strut in *Starcrossed's* hatch with one hand, while reaching out to him with the other. "Here!" she cried.

Lanox gave her a despairing glance but turned instead and fought his way down the rapidly deteriorating corridor toward his own ship. Neela watched in horror, unable to look away, as he pushed himself resolutely forward. More than once he fell and crawled forward on his belly, his hands clawing the deck for some meager purchase against the suction of the rapidly depressurizing corridor. Then somehow, miraculously, he was at *Hazard's* blast door. He struggled to his feet, grasped the edges of the hatch with white knuckled hands, and hauled himself into his ship.

It was the last Neela saw of him before *Hazard's* blast door slammed down, closing him from view.

Only then did Neela turn and run back towards the cockpit of her own ship.

Heedon, white-faced and shaken, was at the helm, with Stasheff barely conscious, in a low-slung chair behind him.

"We're free of the claw and the tractor beam!" Heedon cried. "The computers have returned control!"

"Back into space then, man, and make the jump as soon as you can!" Neela cried.

As Heedon obeyed and they were finally soaring back toward the safety of the stars, Neela glanced desperately out the port.

Hazard had somehow stabilized; she no longer appeared to be in danger of crashing, but still she listed helplessly. To all appearances, the Star Destroyer was dead.

Starcrossed reached point and streaked into lightspeed.

* * *

"It may sound treasonous, but I have a grudging admiration for that Imperial," Neela admitted. She walked beside Se'lab on the grounds of the Rebel base on Carosi XII. The citation that she -- along with Heedon, and the recovering Stasheff -- had only just received for saving the base on Horob, was clutched in her hand. "He believes as fervently in the Empire as I despise it," she continued. "Yet he risked his life to save an enemy who almost destroyed him. If our roles were reversed, I doubt I'd have done the same."

"Before you become too sentimental over the enemy, remind yourself of the lives he's *destroyed*," the Bothan reminded her. He stopped walking, forcing her to do the same, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Don't let others hear you talk this way, they may not be as understanding as I am."

Neela grimaced. "Se'lab, please understand. It's not that I approve of Lanox, I merely..." she sighed, thought a moment, then gave a resigned shrug. "He saved my life. If he survived the explosions aboard the *Hazard*, I can't help wondering if the Empire will deal harshly with him for losing his ship to the likes of us. I pity *anyone* who falls into Palpatine's hands."

Se'lab shook his head. "One less Imperial is no tragedy. Come now, or you'll miss your own celebration."

When Neela entered the mess hall, a cheer went up. She accepted a hearty round of congratulations, then spotted Stasheff and Heedon at a corner table, surrounded by what appeared to be their own enthusiastic fan club.

Stasheff, his right arm and shoulder encased in a bacta cast, gave her a reproving smile as she joined them.

The crowd politely dispersed, giving the three champions of Horob time to themselves.

"I never thought of myself as a hero before," Heedon mused. He raised his glass in the direction of the departing revelers, "but they say I am, so who am I to argue?"

Neela laughed, nodded, and turned her attention to her bodyguard. "I can't say the cast becomes you, Stasheff. I do hope you'll be wearing something a little more fashionable in the near future."

"That depends upon you," he answered.

"Ah," she smiled. "Then you've decided to stay on as my bodyguard?"

"Only if you confine all your bluffs to sabacc, ma'am."

"No promises," she smiled, then leaned confidentially toward him. "Actually, Stasheff, you're really quite handsome with your shirt off."

He blushed.

"Speaking of bluffs," Heedon interjected. "You missed the news that just came over the net." He tapped the table and a holoprojector elevated through the middle. "But we saved it for you."

"What ...?" Neela began.

"Just watch," Heedon ordered.

There was a momentary blur of static, a crackle of noise, then the holographic image of Sergus Lanox appeared on a grand spectator stage, with the renowned Imperial Grand Admiral Takel, himself, standing opposite him.

"Why, he's receiving a citation!" Neela yelled.

Takel placed the ribbon around Lanox's neck. "For extreme heroism, and for not relinquishing your ship, even when faced with the latest and most heinous example of Rebel terrorism since the destruction of Alderaan," Takel was saying, "I present you with this, the Distinguished Medal of Imperial Honor."

There was applause from an unseen audience.

"What do you think of that!" Stasheff exclaimed.

Neela flicked the holoprojector off and settled back in her chair. "I think," she answered, "that we may not have seen the last of Sergus Lanox after all." She raised her mug in salute. "To improbable victories, gentlemen."

And she drained her glass.

A Free Trader's Guide To The Planets

"Come on, To'iir! We've no time to hang around here!" urged Liadden. "Roff will have hunters on us in no time!"

To'iir gazed calmly at Liadden over his old-fashioned reading spectacles from the datacomp station. "Young one, we have no time to spare indeed. I waste not time. I plan." To'iir gestured at the screen. "Witness."

Liadden marched over with the frustrated patience of a child humoring a parent.

The screen read: *Welcome to the Free-Trader's Guide.*

This service is provided by the Lantillan Spacers Brotherhood and the information was compiled by members in good standing. The basic service is free. Certain features are available to Lantillan Brothers at a minimal charge. Although the Brotherhood has verified facts where possible, no guarantee of accuracy is assured or implied. The Lantillan Spacers Brotherhood will not be held responsible for lost profits or harm befallen, directly or indirectly, as a result of ventures arising herefrom. Enter parameters to search."

To'ir typed an entry: "Trader's gamble."

Restricted Feature. Enter your Brotherhood registration number and password.

The Twi'lek entered his code.

Accepted. Warning: The Trader's Gamble feature is intended to alert Brethren in good standing of potentially lucrative markets. These markets are usually dangerous, remote, and generally unpleasant. The Brotherhood wishes you luck. 4112 entries found. Retrieve or Refine?

To'ir entered his specifications: "Refine; Outer Rim."

682 entries found. Retrieve or Refine?

"Refine; Slice."

312 entries found. Retrieve or Refine?

"Refine; Starport of Limited Services or less," To'ir typed.

13 entries found. Retrieve or Refine?

"Retrieve list."

Altor 14, Barab I, Baros, Byss, Chad, Dar'Or, Gamorr, Garban, Kirdo III, Kubindi, Laboi II, Lasat, Ossell II, Toola. Retrieve entries?

"So what, To'ir? We need to bolt out of here!" Liadden fumed.

"Yes, but where bolt to?" replied the amused and patient To'ir. "Hyperspace travel not like driving down road or flying airspeeder, young one. Must have destination. Safe enough out here, but can not stay forever." The wizened little trader briskly tapped in commands.

On the icy edge of the system, the *Seventy-Seven Stars* sat as patiently as its master. Liadden, full of the fire and speed of youth, couldn't sit at all, and paced as To'ir reviewed his data.

"Come on, To'ir! We'll just go to the first place on the list!" she urged after a short respite.

"Altor 14? No, I not like Altorians. Lizards too passive, birds too violent and unpredictable. You get in fights so easy, you be in danger." To'ir reflected absently as Liadden bristled. "Must be careful to go to place with little Imperial presence, also. Do not forget that Moff. Here. What you think?"

Liadden stopped pacing long enough to examine the entry.

Shape Shifters

To: Obo Rin

From: Major Vontenn

RE: Parameters of inclusion for Catalog of Sentient Life in the Galaxy

I feel it necessary to stipulate an important point in your continued research in the service of the Empire. Following the fall of the Republic, a great deal of information was lost from the government archives. Among the databases that greatly suffered were the accounts of amorphous intelligent beings. The Empire is most interested in obtaining information regarding the following species, as most of what is known is from secondhand (or worse) accounts, conjecture, or wild rumors. While the position of the Imperial Military in regard to non-humans is known, it is the Emperor's decree that a great deal can be learned from these evolutionary freaks. While you have compiled reports in the past regarding certain aliens that fall under the classification of Orphic, like the wretched Ugors, you are ordered to compile information about the Proteans, the Polydroxol, the Stennes Shifters, and the Shi'ido. Please complete your research as promptly as possible. Do your best to separate the myth from reality.

* * *

It was a speedy piece, set in two-four time, and the red ball jett organ was programmed for a brassy sound. None of these musical features inspired the form behind the corner table to sip his glass of foamy blue liquor any faster. Rather, it was an invisible tension that quickened his pace.

"Pyron?" a voice found its way through the tangle of background conversation and jazz-wail. "Pyron Nox, is that you?"

The glass of liquor came to rest on the table, allowing a response.

"Yes, I'm sorry... I can't see you from here..."

"It's Gideon, Skies, it's been years since I've seen you last. You haven't changed a bit." A lanky man stepped through the parting shadows. He was handsome,

as humanoid standards went, with a mop of tousled blond hair, and a face lined by stellar radiation.

"Well, my eyes aren't quite as good as they once were." Pyrron pointed toward his shaded plasses, "Ought a coronal flare with my phototropics down. Now I get to watch that flare all the time."

"Ouch. It'd be a shame not to be able to get a look at the Beginner's Luck's Lines. How is the ol' bird?" Gideon pulled a seat from a neighboring unoccupied table and sat down.

"Oh. she still soars. And your ship? How goes it with her?"

"The Independent Class can still run ellipses 'round you, if that's what you're asking. In fact, me and Keeta are in port picking up a new intermix cowlings. Ol' Classy keeps melting the used ones." Gideon tapped the menu keys set into the table, Pyrron made a mental note of what he ordered.

"Keeta? How is Keeta?" Pyrron asked, trying not to sound too awkward.

"She's as strong as she ever was, and as playful as a kit' sometimes, you hear? She should be along in a moment. She'll be glad to see you." Gideon's voice lowered. "You should know, she lost an eye. We're saving for some cybers, but, credit's tight right now."

"That's terrible. How did it happen?" Pyrron downed a draught of drink.

"Got into a tussle with some ol' Boss Trome's muscle. A bloody shifter, it was."

"Shifter?" Pyrron brought his glass up again. "You mean a shape-shifter. What kind?"

"Does it matter?" Gideon grimaced. "The slimy gobs are all the same. Not a drop of honor in any of 'em. I mean, the Empire might be two-faced, but at least they don't go 'round pretending to be my mother, you copy?"

"Gideon, I believe you're being quite dense, Firstly, there are many types of shape-shifter aliens out there, and I find there are even more rumors than there are facts. I could tell you stories. Actually, I heard one just recently..."

If was a soulless moan, thought Moff Bandor. The product of a being that thought it felt pain. Bandor keyed his deskdomm. "Berlihat, be sure to feed Lonchan."

A nasal voice responded on the opposite end of the circuit.

"Sir? I'm an analytical programmer, sir, I'm afraid I do not..."

"You are my servant, Berlihat. I pay you well, don't I? The cook has left a pile of vegetables near the mess hall. All you have to do is bring them down, and leave them at the entrance."

Berlihat keyed off the switch. He'd served at Bandor's palace for only a week here on Questal, and already it was quite different than his time at Eriadu. He was used to a Moff's eccentricities, but Bandor was like none he'd ever served. He had a reputation for striking fear in his opponents from a distance, and some believed him to have lapped into long-forgotten Sith powers. His crowning obsession, however, was located meters beneath the palace-Bandor's cursed game chambers, where he would pit his foes in a deadly game of survival,

One of Bandor's pets needed lending to, and now Russo Berlihat, a graduate of the finest Technical Academy in the Core, found himself carrying a platter of foul-smelling, wilted vegetables into the caverns.

Perhaps humiliation was another of Bandor's obsessions. The progress into the catacombs was uneventful. From polished corridors to ragged rock walls, Berlihat refused to be scared by the shadows dancing in the corners. He continued down the steps, remembering the tales he had heard from the secretarial pool. Laser traps, rooms triggered to simulate earthquakes, rogue bounty hunters. "a pit of wind," and other unspeakable items tucked away in forgotten chambers.

No. focus on your task. No one is in the chambers now, so none of the traps will be activated. Berlihat locked his eyes on his tray before him, refusing to let the dark shadows and craggy walls distract him. He stared at the rannagourds and balka greens... and then it struck him.

Why would Bandar keep a herbivore in his game chambers?

A clatter filled the narrow corridor as Berlihat dropped the vegetable platter. He began running back toward the entry. A solid disk of stone rolled across the opening. Berlihat slammed balled fists, scraping them against the implacable door.

"Twenty-three minutes, twelve seconds. Well done, Berlihat. You nearly halved the time of our last analytical engineer." Bandor's voice echoed from unseen speakers.

"Bandor!" Berlihat shouted indignantly. "You son of a vervikk! Get me out of here! Feed your pets, will I?"

"Yes, you will." A few seconds of silence. Then the wall poured itself onto the ground, forming a puddle of rock that reached out, making a loop around Berlihat's leg. Frozen in panic, he watched as the inner curve of the loop grew small conical lumps. His senses returned from whatever portion of his body they had fled for and the instant that Berlihat flinched his leg, the lumps turned into jagged teeth...

* * *

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" Gideon snarled. "You have the sensitivity of a worrt."

"Don't you see," Pyrron continued. "That Protean only killed because that's what it was made into...by a human."

"I'm not buying this. Pyrron. Next, you'll have me feeling sorry for the rancor 'cause of the abuse it sustained from a Hutt."

"Well, actually..." Pyrron was cut off as a tall, supple form walked to the table.

She was tall, with wiry muscles, a twitching tail, and a piercing green eye. The other eye, if it still existed, would be concealed beneath a black leather patch. Her fur was cream-colored, and her fangs white. She was a Trianii named Keeta.

"The cowlings been bought," she purred, "we just have to go pick it up. Nox... how you holding up?"

"Oh, reasonably well," He smiled.

"That's good news, Keet. Great news." Gideon sipped his drink.

Keeta's eyes narrowed, "What'd I walk in on?"

"Nothing," Gideon said.

"Well, actually...we were talking about shape-shifters " Pyrron continued, not looking at Gideon,

"Pyrron..." Gideon half stood up.

"It's okay," she sat down, helping herself to Gideon's drink. "What did we come up with?"

"Pyrron was just trying to tell me that not all the slimy gobs are bad. Like it's social conditioning, for Core's sake!"

"I don't know about that, Nox. The one that got me didn't even give me the grace of looking it right in the eye. I just saw my reflection, my eyes, when it bit." Keeta cupped her glass, staring off into the past.

"Reflection?" Pyrron asked.

"Yeah. This-what'd you call it, Protean? - of yours looked like a quicksilver killer." Gideon offered.

"Oh, that wasn't a Protean, then," Pyrron clarified. "It was a Polydroxol."

"A what?" Keeta asked.

"Polydroxol. Boss Trome must've been to Sevetta and wrangled one up. It's a shame. On their own world, they're really quite beautiful."

"Beautiful?" If Gideon had had his drink, he would have doubtlessly been choking by now.

"Yes, I once heard of a Polydroxol caught by the Karflo corporation..."

* * *

"Computer," DeSelvaine began, "start recording. Subject: Polydroxol Silver in coloration."

DeSelvaine paced around the lab, checking instrumentation as he spoke into the tiny, ring-mounted pick-up.

"Mass: 135.4 kilograms. Current configuration is an oblong ta-perect oval, about 1,5 meters in length, and .45 meters in diameter. Surface exhibits no movement. Has retained this form for the past thirty minutes, thirty-four seconds. Computer, pause recording."

DeSelvaine went to the interface screen, checking the logs. He had recorded over 125 reports, every half boor, for the past two days. He had very little sleep, napping in twenty-minute stints so as not to miss anything.

"Computer, access personal notes..continuing from before. It seems that the Polyrtmxol has a very long rest cycle, at [east eighteen hours in length. During its waking hours, of which there are about six, it has so far not demonstrated much energy. It's quite a puzzle-why would it need that much rest? Am going to try to get some rest...Polly's moving onto her sleep cycle, so who am I to argue?

Hour 72

DeSelvaine downed his coffiene with renewed vigor. He hadn't realized he was so tired, and after over eight hours of rest, he hoped to stumble on something new with a fresh perspective.

"Computer: personal notes, I programmed myself to dream about the Polly last night. I'm not sure if I did, the only recollection I have is dreaming about Nela Penlase from accounting. I put some thought into what the corporation wants me to do with Polly. I've heard stories about Karflo ever since I was a junior tech. Bad stories. I usually don't go in for urban legends, or for that matter, corporate ones."

He tapped some keys on his control board, raising the blocking screen from the Polydroxol's metal cage,

"This is special. I just hope the corporation sees it as such, Hopefully Renerdat will look beyond the mineral deposits on Sevatta and realize that there are people there. Not flesh and blood people, but people nonetheless. Well, I guess it's up to me to teach them.

"It's really a testament to the tenacity of life that it developed on Sevatta at all. Volcanic plains, liquid metal lakes, a surface tempera-Lure of over two hundred and fifty standard degrees. But somehow, in those mercurial lakes, this evolved.

"Needless to say, Sevatta has a poisonous atmosphere. Its pressure is slightly above standard, and most of its lifeforms seem silicon-based. Actually, the Polyriroxol remind me of the stonesinger form of Vaathkree.

"I know intelligence must lurk somewhere in that reflective lump. It will awaken in...nine hours from now. I also know it's not the answer that Administrator Renerdat wants to hear. If these beings are sentient, then he can't skim the metal lakes for the ores he needs. He's a man of profit, not science, I'm afraid. He didn't even see the potential of the being he had his toadies drag into my labs, All he saw was an impedance in his financial planning. What a narrow-sighted fool."

DeSelvaine paused, took another sip, "Computer: delete last 10 seconds of personal notes,"

Hour 77

DeSelvaine double-checked the probe rig, a set of spindly mechanical arms with disrupter generators that would penetrate the magnetic field holding the metal cage,

"Computer, start recording. Subject: Polydroxol, hour 77, The magnetiscopic and EM scans reveal a central circulatory system like none I have ever seen. There seems to be a flexible network of arterial passages, made from the same metallic substance as the rest of the subject. However, no oxygenated iron-rich blood flows through these passages.

"It appears to be a gaseous plasma, electrically charged. Electroglobin. From the look of the makeup of the arterial passages, I would venture to call this the Polydroxol's nucleus. Closer examination of the plasma shows remarkably complex patterns that suggest that this is where a Polydroxol's life energy rests. This answers several questions as to whether the Polydroxol can completely physically disassociate itself. It stems that the subject can take no actions that would breach this nucleus. Computer, end recording."

DeSelvaine fit his hands into the mimic gloves controlling the probe. He didn't really want to do this, but if he had to, the subject's sleep cycle would be the best time to do it.

With a haze of discharged energy, the probe's arms pierced the magnetic containment field. The spindly arms produced what to humans would be a frightening tool. DeSelvaine wondered if the Polydroxol had any inkling as to what fear was.

Hour 81

"Computer, begin recording. After thorough examination of the biopsy, it seems my theory that Polydroxol cannot control elements separated from their body is false. Somehow, the surface fluctuations inherent in the larger subject is replicated perfectly in the smaller section. I have determined the upper range of this link to be thirty-five meters when I took the sample to the mess hall, and noticed the activity to drop off suddenly.

"Examination of the smaller fragment shows the metallic substance to be a highly complex variant of denantium, with several trace composites of unknown material, I would perform standard temperature and pressure tests, but I fear doing it in this lab, since this may transmit pain in the parent body, I have looked into requesting time in Sera's labs, but he seems to be busy concocting something-computer, replace 'concocting' with 'working on.'"

DeSelvaine smiled. Officially, both he and Sera were told to knock off their rivalry. There were many scientists in this division, and they were no more privileged than the others when it came to requisitioning lab space and supplies. However, DeSelvaine was certain the Polydroxol was going to make him famous. It was-

"Computer, begin recording! This is most remarkable. The subject seems to have... a wakened, H is definitely moving... to place a humanoid analogy on it... I would say that it was stretching. It -oh my-it is now undergoing some sort of surface transformation. Its silvery substance seems to be reforming, adopting...adopting., .remarkable!11

The metallic blob was no longer silver. It was the exact dull gray of the cage that surrounded it.

Hour 84

"Computer: begin personal note recording. If I were a child, this would make the perfect Fete Week gift. A mimetic polymorph, I have, for the last three hours, exposed Polly to forty-six different substances to see which surface patterns it can mimic.

"Polly seems only able to copy and reproduce surface textures of metallic compounds, and some plastics. She cannot replicate organic patterns, as my experiments with fur, wood, and certain animal test subjects attest to. I have not attempted human flesh as yet. Polly cannot assume the surface texture of minerals such as stone, or most crystalline structures. She can, seemingly on a reflex level, copy most metallic surfaces, including non-inherent surface textures. When I took a studded segment of deck plating, not only did she reproduce the dark gray coloration, but the surface studs as well. She seems capable of reproducing surface markings as well, as she copied the logo from a can of fizzyglug, although only the "f" through "l" were copied and reproduced. Presumably, if she understood Basic or Aurebesh, she could reproduce most markings. It's important to note that only the surface texture is replicated, and Polly's essential material does not undergo any physical change. The change apparently must be prompted through contact."

Hour 87

The Polydroxol was asleep again.

"It was an incredible six hours," DeSelvaine spoke into his personal logs. "Any shape that I showed Polly she would form. And not just basic geometric shapes like squares or spheres. She reproduced dodecahedrons, and even Mobius curves. I know this is more than reflex. There must be intelligence behind it. I

have begun talking to her, coaxing her on. I know it makes a difference, but it is hardly scientific."

Hour 102

The coffiene had long been replaced by a flask of Corellian brandy.

"Computer, begin re-cording personal notes. I wonder what Polly's society is like. Is there hatred? Is there injustice? Are there Empires that choke scientific exploration? Are there petty rivalries? Are there teases like Nela Pentase that feign interest and then break your heart? Are there administrators that promise you scientific fulfillment, and then strangle you with bureaucratic flexor cord?

"I did a scan of the planet, including parameters from my research. I scanned for the EM signatures of Polydroxol nuclei. Even from orbit, when I targeted the lake, I found hundreds of them. Hundreds. And what astounded me the most from the scans: they travel in pairs. They always have partners, as they swim formlessly in the lake of liquid metal, "What a truly enviable species."

Hour 113

DeSelvaine rubbed his eyes. They burned with a vengeance. It was bad enough his head hurt from the brandy, but his back was sore from sleeping in a chair, and his face bore the marks of laying atop a console all night. He wasn't proud of himself. Nor at the task of erasing his persons! logs of last night. Who knows what Isold? His embarrassing soliloquy of the night before was now nothing more than free memory. Most of what followed was snoring loudly into the ring-pickup. But not all of it.

"Computer, replay from time-index 106:2:24." DeSelvaine adjusted the volume controls, listening carefully.

It was indistinct at first, a sort of gurgling sound. Then... he heard it: "What a truly enviable species. Enviale. Enviale. What a truly enviable species."

It wasn't his voice. It was too deep, and stilted, as if tasting these words for the first time.

"Computer, visual record, time-index 106:2:24 ."The view screen flickered, and there, in flickering holographic was the Polydroxol. With his face.

Hour 114

It hadn't been a perfect replica, of course. It was as if Dr. Trem DeSelvaine had been honored with a silver statue. One that spoke a single phrase over and over again. According the logs, the Polydroxol had kept this up for close to an hour.

DeSelvaine crouched in front of the protected cage. He peered at the seemingly lifeless blob of liquid silver. He held the same holoprojector he had used when he tried the shape experiments. Now, they held holographic records of decidedly non-metallic shapes.

He started with a fish from Mon Calamari. He then moved on to a stormtrooper helmet. Then a TIE fighter. The Polydroxol attempted copies of each one, within the scale possible. The fish was near-perfect. The stormtrooper helmet was a bit skewed, with its lenses appearing larger than they should. The TIE fighter was too complicated to reproduce exactly-its contours too angular, its wings too heavy. He then moved on to portraits His own was reproduced flawlessly. Little wonder, given the amount of time he had already spent with the being. Those of Nela, Sera, Administrator Renerdat, and even the Emperor came out more like caricatures. And so far, the Polydroxol only produced busts floating in liquid metal, not full forms.

DeSelvaine's headache was forgotten. His adrenaline had eliminated the pain. He couldn't even remember the last time he ate. Despite his excitement, he couldn't help but dial up Nela's image on the holoprojector.

Even in a flickering quarter-scale he admired the curve of her smile, the brightness of her eyes. Bringing his eyes up from the holo, DeSelvaine found the same image reproduced in swirling silver, next to a bust of his own. The silver DeSelvaine and the silver Nela floated there, in the shimmering puddle, and then elongated and melted together, with unparalleled grace.

"You... you understand, don't you?" DeSelvaine stammered, "You know. You're intelligent!"

"Nela..." the deep echoing voice bubbled up from the metal quagmire.

"You're intelligent." DeSelvaine repeated, breathlessly.

Hour 115

"Computer, begin personal notes. It's ironic, isn't it The one proof of intelligence, and I can't bring myself to admit it because it implicates my feelings, I guess every scientist must face the burden of ego in the light of scientific proof, but who would have guessed that I would have to do so when I was right, instead of admitting I was wrong?"

DeSelvaine walked closer to the metal cage. He wanted to touch Polly, but even he wouldn't dare drop the magnetic containment field,

"The subject understands love. It knows what I feel. It can recognize it. Surely, this is proof that it is intelligent. I doubt that Renerdat will want to hear this. Station scuttle butt has it that he has already organized a squad to go down there and 'troll the metal lake'. Fool, ignorant fool. He doesn't know what he's got here-Computer, you better delete-"

A buzz from his intercom station interrupted DeSelvaine's order. He slid his chair to the station, punching in the access key "DeSelvalne," he greeted.

"Renerdat," the administrator Identified himself. I trust progress goes well on your end of the investigation?"

His end?

"Actually, sir. I have some very exciting news. I believe I have proof that the Polydroxol is intelligent." DeSelvaine wished he could've checked a mirror before he answered the intercom. He was certain he looked like something the proom dragged in.

"It is a moot point." Re nerd at said. Now that he looked closer, DeSelvaine thought he could see a large welt running across the administrator's face. "You are hereby ordered to destroy the subject,"

"Destroy, sir? Perhaps you didn't understand me, It is intelligent. I cannot-"

"You can and you will," Renerdat's face reddened. "Regardless if it is intelligent, those creatures are dangerous. We just lost twelve of our men in an unprovoked attack from the lake."

Unprovoked! Hardly!

"You went back to the lake...?" DeSelvaine cringed as he pictured the men in corporate armor, firing riot guns into the mercury, the screams of breached nuclei echoing through the Polydroxol pairs, ..

"Sir, I respectfully point out that we have yet to test a definitive means of killing the subject. You see, it has the ability to segment..." DeSelvaine began.

"I know all about the creature's segmenting ability. Dr. Sera discovered it as well. He has also developed a toxin that can kill the subject quite quickly." Renerdat said, conversationally. "You should see it in use, actually. Their deaths are quite spectacular as their electroplasma vents to the surface."

"You had others...?" DeSelvaine was stunned,

"Don't overestimate your value to us. You are but part of the whole. Unfortunately we cannot synthesize enough of the toxin to kill the lake. But we don't want this one lingering around any longer than need be. Sera will be by shortly with the toxin," Renerdat rubbed the welt self-consciously.

Another one, killed already. Did Sera know what he was doing? Did he know what he was killing? DeSelvaine stopped his questioning, realizing what was at stake. He had a good job, with more pay than he could have dreamed. He was not going to jeopardize it,

"Yes, sir. One request, sir? I would like to administer the toxin myself,"

"If this is part of your silly rivalry-" Renerdat began.

"Please, sir." DeSoivaine insisted.

"Very well. You'll find the magno-injector In Sera's lab,"

Hour 115.5

It had taken half an hour to get to Sera's lab on the other side of the station. During the long stroll, DeSelvaine had gathered his thoughts, and heard enough to verify the rumors that Karflo was moving out of Sevetta. "Not enough profit margin" was the official reason given.

He held the metal cylinder in both hands. Inside was an electroplasmatic toxin capable of killing the Polydroxol. What could he do? He couldn't set it free. And once Sera perfected the toxin in an easy-to-replicate formula, all the Polydroxol would be doomed.

And no one knew they were intelligent. Not that it mattered, DeSelvaine stepped through the decontamination station at the front of his lab. He entered his security codes, and walked toward the cage.

And stopped, the metal magno-injector dropping to the ground.

The Polydroxol was gone. The metal cage was empty.

"Computer, remove containment field." DeSelvaine rushed to the cage. His knees weakened-how tired was he?-he stumbled. A fresh vein of ice running through his spine. He rushed into the cage, running a hand-held scanner along its bars.

"Where did you go, girl? Where?" Maybe the Polydroxol vented some of its electroplasma, at a particular phase signature that disrupted the containment field. Maybe he was wrong, and the being could disassociate itself into incredibly small particles. Maybe-

By the time he figured it out, DeSelvaine only had a fraction of a second to congratulate himself. After that, a sharp metal spire knifed through his brain, ironically spearing the synapses that concluded that thought. The cage melted around him, looking as if the original one was shedding its skin, like some sort of exotic snake. Had he checked the mass readout seconds before, DeSelvaine would have seen the cage register at 135.4 kilograms heavier than it should have been.

An eerie voice echoed. "Fool, ignorant fool. He doesn't know what he's got here."

* * *

"You should write children's books, you know that, Pyrron?"

"Pardon?" Pyrron blinked.

"I've seen blind mynocks with more social grace-"

"Pyrron," Keeta interjected, "if the scientist and all aboard the station were murdered, how did you find out about the story?"

"Not every one was killed. The administrator and his aide escaped, and logged the report. Karflo hushed it up. and some slicers came across the reports just recently. And it wasn't murder, It was self-defense. Self-defense against genocide."

"Will you listen to this guy?" Gideon asked to no one in particular.

Keeta's nose wrinkled. "You seem well-versed in this branch of xenobiology. Pyrron. Tell me, do you know of the Stennes legends?"

"The Stennes Shifters? Oh, they are not legends, my dear. They are real!" Pyrron leaned forward, almost as if the table were an ancient bonfire, and he, the respected storyteller. "I actually met one, many years back, on Tatooine..."

* * *

I am Trinto Daaba, though, you may never tell. I sink into shadows. I am a shadow.

There are millions of Stennes, We are near-humans. You "pure" humans remark that we look sad, sullen, ghostly. But a rare few are Stennes Shifters. We are the privileged, for we can shade the eyes. We can shade your mind.

Some find it offensive, some find it alluring, some find it frightening. It is merely a survival technique. To avoid predators. To aid in hunting.

As civilization spread through the Sterirtes sector, we either became prized commodities, or hunted. That is the way with humans, near or otherwise.

Bin we are not easy prey. How can you hunt what you cannot see? Or rather, how can you hunt what you cannot help but not see?

If any species was deserving of the fear and prejudice that marks shape-shifters, then it is the Stennes Shifter. Like other shape-shifters, there is very little known about the Stennes Shifters, save that it is a genetic off-shoot of the near-human Stennes race. Ancient records indicate that more was known about the species in the ancient past of the Republic, but those records are incomplete and largely incomprehensible.

The Jedi Knights of 5,000 years ago faced the Stennes Shifters, and recognized them as a threat. The records indicate that the Jedi of that era decimated the species, and today estimates place the Stennes Shifter population anywhere from several million to less than a thousand.

Legend tells of the dangers of the Stennes Shifter, These beings have been alternately named Force-eaters, due to their eerie natural abilities. The Stennes Shifter have a bizarre sensitivity to the Force. This in itself is not unheard of, as the Gotal and non-sentient vornskr have a limited natural sensitivity to the Force. However, the Stennes's ability to use the Force is possibly unique,

Stennes Shifters draw power from expended Force energy. If those within the vicinity alter the flow of Force around them, the Stennes gain its energy. Further more, legends state that Stennes Shifters can tap the stored Force within unwary beings, like the vampires that lurk in the mythologies of many cultures,

No known Stennes Shifter has ever been medically examined in recent history, so whether these powers are true or only wild conjecture is unknown. The standard Stennes shows no exotic physiological developments that would suggest these abilities.

The Stennes near-humans are a xenophobic lot, as millennia of persecution has ensured that many non-shifters have been killed. The Stennes home world of Stennaros is a world pock-marked with artillery craters, and the scars of years of persecution. While the Stennes avoid contact with the outside world, they are generally sociable and culturally advanced in their own closed system,

The Stennes have taken to hunting their own kind, tracking down any shifters that may attempt to conceal themselves among the population. As a result, the Stennes Shifters are a homeless species, not welcome even on their own world.

The Stennes Shifter's shifting ability is not based on physical change, but on telepathic manipulation. Whether this is a Force-based ability is unknown, It is known that this ability does not extend to mechanical optical devices, like photoreceptors and holocams. The shifter appears in its normal form: a slight human-oid with grayish skin and a sunken, skull-like face.

The shifter's reputed abilities far exceed its actual "shape-changing" abilities. In truth, the Stennes cannot alter their form, or make others perceive them as different beings. Rather, the Stennes Shifters have the ability to mask their appearances by making others not notice them. This ability only works in large crowds, as a single, isolated Stennes Shifter in an empty room could not mask his presence.

The few Stennes Shifters that exist today do their best to remain hidden, only using their powers when absolutely necessary and posing as normal Stennes. Those who cannot assimilate into society blend into crowds, earning a living as thieves, spies, or informants.

* * *

Pyrron finished his tale, staring off into space. His attention drifted back to the present, noticing Keeta and Gideon having a heated-but whispered-exchange.

"My friends," Pyrron said, "I seem to be the only one equipped with a voice-box today. Please, tell me about yourself."

"Right..." said Gideon. "Well...um."

"We were just by Kessel the other week," said Keeta. "We saw Cleven there. You remember Cleven,"

"Um, of course," Pyrron finished his drink. "How Is Cleven? It seems like ages."

"Actually, its only been about eight months, remember?" Gideon answered,
"Eight months ago when Cleven was killed,"

Whatever entity controlled such things in the universe decided thai now would
he the most opportune moment to stop the music, As the band took a
breather, Pyrron also inhaled deeply.

Gideon's hand came up from below the tahle. filled with a mean-looking
blaster.

Keeta kept both hands on her drink. "So, which one are you?" She asked.

"Friends, please, there has been a misunderstanding-" Pyrron raised both
hands slowly.

"What did you do with Pyrron, gob? You kill him too?" Gideon asked.

"K-kill? No, I never killed anyone. He gave me transport..." Pyrron stopped,
closed his mind.

And Gideon felt it...the tugging at his mind, the blurring of bis vision, the
erasing of his memory...

His reflexes, however, were unaffected. And as any spacer knows, t be trigger-
finger is powered by reflex,

A blast of sound and light ended the conversation...

* * *

To: Major Vontenn

From: Obo Rin

Re: Report on Shape-shifters.

In my research I have come across innumerable misconceptions-far more than any hard facts when it comes to shape-shrfters. Even the name is inaccurate, as no respected scientific journal would use the term shape-shilters.

There have been other terms: polymorphs, metamorphs, and even quasimorphs. None of these terms do the beings justice, because it assumes each shape-shifter belongs to the same family. There is no basis for such an assumption.

Firstly, there are mammalian shape-shifters, such as the Stennes and the Shi'ido. These are more closely related to humanity than some of the more bigoted members would like to find out. Then, there are beings who do not fit the traditional picture of shape-shifters, but who fit the vague definition because they lack static forms: the gaseous Filar-Nitzan, or the Lahsbees and Dazouri, who have two distinct morphological forms. Certain species of insectoids could be called shape-shifters, as they radically assume new forms in different stages of their lives. If taken to the extreme, even we humans can be accused of shape-shifting, as we achieve new size and dimension in our normal growth cycle.

It is both troubling and exciting as a scientist that there is such a tack of standardization or base of knowledge in this field. It does mean that there is ample room for discovery,"and many rumors or myths to dispel.

Firstly, human prejudice has painted the role of deceptive killer on all shape-shifting beings. While some species like the Stennes may be warranted of this stereotype, most shape-shifters are unfairly tarred with this epithet. The Proteans and the Ugors have great appetites, and must kill for sustenance, but this does not make them cold-blooded killers. Due to the lack of available information, paranoia has painted in the ignorance with fear.

Among other assumptions, many believe that these shape-shifters can produce exact simulacra of other beings. This is not true. The most determined probe, whether medical or interrogative, will reveal an attempted impersonation.

Secondly, many believe that shape-shifters can assume any shape, any size, any form. Each species has definite physical, physiological, and even cultural limits on their shape-shifting ability. Very few can accrue additional matter, building their mass significantly, like the Lahsbees when they change into their Huhk form. Most are trapped at their current mass limits. Not all can alter their

surface to match their surroundings. Most are challenged by complex patterns. Even those shifters who rely on psionic and telepathic "smokescreening" to alter their form are vulnerable to mechanical cameras or droid photoreceptors. The amorphic shape-shifters, like the Ugors and Polydroxol, find the humanoid form difficult to maintain. These beings can make do with blob-like forms, without having to exude the redundant and complex extremities of the humanoid form.

Until more research, like the sort undertaken by myself, comes to light, the galaxy will have to continue living in the shroud of ignorance when it comes to these remarkable species.

* * *

After only four standard months of research, I must ask for an extension in my continued report. You must understand the complexity of these cultures and the difficulty of obtaining information regarding them. When I attempted reaching Moff Bandor, he was busy dealing with an apparent Rebel uprising on his world. His bureaucrats did send me medical records of the Proteans, so I am confident that these files are accurate.

The Polydroxol report I had to obtain from slicers who cut into Karflo Corporation databanks. They insist that the files are genuine. You'll find their fee in the attached expense vouchers. No information was available on the Stennes Shifter, and I am afraid that this species will remain a mystery.

When it comes to the Shi'ido, an interesting tale unfolds. I had counted on Imperial Senior Anthropologist (Indeterminate) Vandolae to be my prime source of information, as this respected Shi'ido was actually in the employ of a university on Coruscant. When my message was received, I was informed that Vandolae was on an undercover anthropological study of fringe spacer life, and was currently on Centares.

When I arrived there, I found Vandolae dead, killed by a pair of spacers. It seems that he became too involved in his research. He was disguised as a spacer himself, complete with cosmetic appliances and false features. Although my research into the Shi'ido is incomplete, I cannot think of a better example of the limitations of a shape-shifter's abilities.

The finishing touches of Shi'ido transformation are executed telepathically. This telepathic process does not appear to be related to the Force, and is instead a function of a neurotransmitter organ located at the base of the Shi'ido brain. The telepathic process is used to "paint" an image atop the new humanoid form, giving it a final look as envisioned by the Shi'ido. Certain species, like the Hutts, who are more resistant to telepathic suggestion, cannot be fooled by the Shi'ido.

Beyond this telepathic painting, Shi'ido also use their natural telepathy to fog the minds of those around them, erasing suspicion and distracting people from asking probing questions. This is reportedly a difficult process, and maintaining a telepathic aura among many people is difficult, if those people are actively examining the Shi'ido. In large bustling crowds, however, the Shi'ido, like most species, can disappear with little effort.

Obo Rin.

Festival Of The High Winds

The macrobinocular image shifted in and out of focus as the auto-ranging system futilely attempted to take an accurate reading through the blowing sands. Jax switched off the auto-focus and adjusted the controls himself as the Imperial landing pad came into view.

A squad of sandtroopers formed up outside the ship as the hatch dropped open. The first shackled prisoner stepped out and stumbled briefly as he took a dizzying breath of the spice-tainted air. Jax never understood the reaction of some off-worlders to Sevarcos atmosphere. To him the air always seemed sweet and invigorating after the cold, stale air of the off-worlder ships.

The prisoner regained his balance and moved forward as more prisoners were marched off the shuttle toward the underground mine entrance. Jax focused on each of the faces briefly, comparing them to the datapad at his side. Then he recognized one of them; a black-haired, broad-shouldered human who moved with steady steps toward the mine entrance, his head slowly turning as he took in his brief glimpse of Sevarcos's barren landscape before disappearing into the mine.

At least the Rebel information was accurate this time.

Jax crawled back from the ridgeline as he thought about the last time he had helped the Rebels. The information they had relayed to him then had been completely faulty. But Jax knew the desert and he knew the Imperials. With some help from another nomad clan tracker he had located the target and almost saved the mission before the Rebel Ops team had arrived.

The blasted off-worlders with their "superior" technology and "superior" intellect—they certainly didn't need the help of a stupid desert-dweller so primitive he still used a slugthrower. Of course, who had saved them when their ship was shot down for flying in restricted airspace and their blasters overloaded from the sand storm?

Jax reached a small sand dune and grabbed at one side of it, revealing a small wind rider covered by a dust-coated tarp. As he raised the small mast and set out across the desert, he pondered who the Rebels might send after the last disastrous mission. Whoever it was, he hoped they'd be better able to adapt to Sevarcos than the last had.

Chronicles Of The Gatekeeper

The holocron was heavy in Suljo Warde's hand, almost as if weighed down by the knowledge sealed inside. Warde almost chuckled as his old master's voice came to his mind unbidden. "Knowledge is the heaviest burden." Had his teacher ever actually said that, or did it just sound like the sort of heavy-handed wisdom she would come up with? He'd have to ask her when he returned from this tour of duty with the Grand Army of the Republic.

"Did you say something, Suljo?" the young Mirialan asked. He turned from the controls of the starship to address the Jedi, breaking him from his reverie.

"Was I muttering to myself, Gel? Sorry, I guess I'm getting more like my old teacher every day. I'll have to introduce you to my master when we get to Coruscant."

"Wow, a Jedi Master. I never thought I'd get to meet a Jedi Master. I mean, not that I'm not impressed by you as a Knight and all... but a Master!" The youth trailed off, his excitement obvious. Warde smiled. The teenager had considerable potential. A bit old to start training, perhaps, but Warde had a feeling Gel Marcolf was going places, and the Jedi Order would be remiss not to at least put him to the test. The young pilot had saved his life on Eriadu when he had been fleeing from Separatist assassins, at the very least.

The holocron tugged at Warde's mind again, and reflexively, he peered forward in time. The vision came as a brief flash of a future. A war without end, raging across the stars for decades and claiming the lives of his comrades, his master, his friends, Gel. He shook his head. It was just one possible future. Just one of many, as the Jedi Masters always said. He wouldn't let that come to pass.

Still, he withdrew the holocron from his robes and studied it for a moment. In the kyber crystals it contained, Suljo Warde had sealed all of his knowledge of the Force, a crystalline record that would live long after he became one with the Force. It was a way to project his wisdom not just across space but across time. Into the future, whether it was the one he foresaw or not.

Warde focused on the holocron this time, staring through the ghostly forms of unborn realities. His mind's eye came to rest on a group of figures slinking in shadow, their features indistinct but their desperation clear. Darkness closed in on all sides. Suddenly, one reached down and withdrew it: the holocron, glimmering against the dark.

"You all right, Suljo? Hey, Suljo!"

The Jedi Knight shook himself again, breaking free from the remnants of the vision clinging to his conscious mind. "Yes, I'm fine. Sorry, I hate to delay our arrival any longer, but we need to make a stop on the way to Arbooine. There's something I have to do. Take us to these coordinates once we come out of hyperspace." He punched in a destination and then set himself to the task of removing the kyber crystals within the holocron.

Warde stood on the surface of the craggy little world. It seemed auspicious enough. Out of the way, but not so far-flung that nobody would ever find what he had hidden there. Sooner or later, some explorer or smuggler or fugitive would come across the holocron, and if they were worthy, the gatekeeper would guide them from there.

He returned to the ship, where Gel was waiting. "What did you need to do here, anyway, Suljo?"

Warde didn't speak, instead tossing something to the young Mirialan. Gel's hand snapped out and he caught the glimmering shard.

"Good reflexes. Know what that is?"

Gel studied it for a moment, looking closely at the stone before turning to look quizzically at the Jedi.

"It's called a kyber crystal. You could say it contains some of my wisdom."

"It feels kind of light. Does that mean that you—"

"Aren't very wise? Very funny. Don't think I didn't make that same joke with my master when I was a student. Of course, she made me run laps around the temple afterward."

"Does that mean that I'm your student? I'll run laps and everything!" Excitement shone in the youth's eyes.

Warde sighed. He didn't want to get Gel's hopes up prematurely, despite the young man's potential. "Don't tire yourself out just yet. You're pretty old to start the training. But keep that crystal safe for me, would you? For now, anyway. Someday, someone else might need it. If they're worthy, pass it along to them. That is my first charge for you, and we'll see how you do at that."

"Sure!"

The two boarded the vessel, the remaining pair of kyber crystals clicking together periodically in Warde's pocket as he walked. Even if someone found the holocron, chances were slim that they'd be able to assemble all of it. But it wasn't impossible. That future he had seen wasn't preordained, at least no more than any other, or so the masters said. Still, he couldn't shake the image of it. Entrusting his power to unknown future successors was a risk, but didn't all teachers take that risk by training students? At least the gatekeeper would be there, a small reflection of himself to guide anyone capable of learning his power of foresight.

The matter settled, Warde focused, forcing it from his mind. He had prepared as best he could, and now he had to stop dwelling on uncertainties and focus on the present. Arbooine would be key to victory over the Separatists in the coming months, and after that, who knew what the future really held?

Mask Of The Pirate Queen

Engineering report, sir," Ensign Narish announced, and Captain Riles spun his chair around to face her. "Minor fluctuation in the portside engine's output, but the chief says it won't cause too much trouble before Saleucami."

Riles nodded as he took the datapad from the young Twi'lek. "Well done, ensign," he said, signing off on the report and handing the datapad back to her. Riles turned back to the ship's console, but Narish still stood at attention.

"Is there something else?"

Narish nodded. "Zevrix has received a transmission from Ryloth, sir. There are reports of pirate activity along our route. Shall we raise the convoy's alert status?"

The captain blinked at her question. "Pirates?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, captain," Narish said. "The communiqué warns all ships in the area to be on guard."

Riles laughed. "No pirate would be foolish enough to attack a Consortium convoy," he replied. "Zann's got them all tied up in his webs."

"But the communiqué came from *Ryloth*, sir," she said, stressing the planet's name. Any message from Ryloth, Consortium headquarters, was as good as from Tyber Zann himself.

"I've made this run a dozen times, ensign," Riles said, his voice echoing louder than he intended. He caught himself, and reassured her, "We've nothing to be afraid of."

His words sounded hollow. Everyone aboard the *Censure* had heard rumors about the recent attacks; a vicious band of buccaneers had even dared to capture one of the Consortium's own transports. Hushed voices around galley tables spoke of the transport's crew, butchered to the last when they refused to heave to and take on boarders.

Those worried whispers could not say which ship had been taken, and until now there had been no proof, but the communiqué from Ryloth gave the tales an air of legitimacy. Riles glanced surreptitiously at the crew—every eye was upon him. Blast Narish! Blast Zevrix, too!

"Very well, ensign," he nodded. "Raise the alert status to ready. Will that suffice?"

Narish, relieved, nodded. "Aye, sir," she said.

"Inform all sections of the change." *Get out of my sight*, he thought as she scurried away to her station. *She'll feel more the fool once we've docked securely in—*

"Unknown vessel emerging from hyperspace, Captain," Ops Officer Vensin interrupted a bit too loudly. "And another...two more, sir!"

Riles closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. It was like a self-fulfilling prophecy. "Raise shields," he ordered sullenly. "Increase speed to flank. Gunners to their stations."

"Aye," Vensin replied. "Two more ships, captain! That's five altogether."

"I can count, Vensin, thank you." Riles pulled up his own display and glanced over the sensor readings. Five ships, one of them a *Consular*-class cruiser, were maneuvering into attack position.

Zevrix chimed in from the comm station, his Verpine voice sounding out the words in clicks and buzzes. "They are hailing us, captain."

"Don't keep them waiting, then," he replied. "Put it on speaker."

A burst of static assaulted the bridge, then silenced. "This is the captain of the *Renegade's Blood*," announced a feminine, whispering voice. "Order your vessels to heave to and prepare to be boarded. You have one standard minute to comply."

Riles opened his mouth to answer, but the signal had already been dropped. No chance for parley, then, he thought as he chewed his lower lip. No Consortium threats or bribes would be offered or accepted today.

"Send an encoded transmission to the rest of the convoy," Riles instructed Zevrix. "Order them to repel all boarders. Any captain who surrenders to these scum will be executed by me personally."

"But sir!" Narish objected. "You've heard the stories! If we don't surrender, they'll kill us all!"

Under normal circumstances, Riles might have shot Narish for her insubordination. Instead, he smiled and slowly shook his head. "And what do you think Tyber Zann will do to us if we submit?"

Narish's blue skin paled.

"Sit down, ensign," Riles ordered her. "If we're dead either way, let's make them pay for the privilege."

Strongholds Of Resistance

I woke with a start. "They know," I thought, my heart pounding in my chest. "They know everything."

But how could they? I'd been on the planet, a so-called safe world, for eight months and counting. I'd supped and spoken with these people, tended their wounds and soothed their sicknesses, made friends of them, and shared stories of my own tortured past at the hands of the evil Galactic Empire.

The stories were lies, of course, which I had carefully rehearsed for the benefit of Imperial Intelligence over the course of one grueling year—a year of learning how to be a Rebel, how to pose as one of the countless insurgents who swarmed the galaxy in an effort to undermine the Emperor and all of his great works. They were heartless guerrillas with nothing to lose, who would sacrifice entire populations to gain one measly foothold on any one of a thousand squalid worlds.

Except they weren't heartless.

The Rebels I'd come to know weren't the pernicious villains my overlords had taught me they were. They were beings of substance. The more time I spent with them, the less sure I was that my course was the correct one. I grappled with my conscience every single day.

The nights were even worse. I lay in my bed with cold sweat trickling onto the thin pillow I'd inherited from some long-dead freedom fighter. When I slept, I faced uneasy dreams in which my Rebel companions peered at me with suspicious eyes. Despite my denials, I would inevitably feel the cold ring of a blaster barrel on the back of my head before snapping awake in terror.

My check-in with Imperial Intelligence was long overdue. They might even consider me a casualty by now. Perhaps I could continue my charade, truly throwing my support behind the Alliance and the brave people with whom I worked, day in and day out. If I were ever caught, the Empire would treat me no less harshly than the Rebels themselves. What did I have to lose?

I shoved the treasonous thoughts from my mind, closed my eyes tightly, and resigned myself to my fate.

The traitors were getting to me, turning me against the Empire. My trainers in Imperial Intelligence had warned me this could happen. Even the staunchest Imperial citizen could be corrupted by the Rebel Alliance. The sooner I provided my masters with the world's location, the sooner I could leave this miserable life of deception behind.

It was settled. I'd find some time to go for a walk that afternoon and secretly activate the beacon I'd disguised within a Chandrilan worry doll. It was an heirloom of my former life, or so I'd told them. I'd even managed to tear up, hiding my welling eyes behind a

shaky hand. For their part, the Rebels had nodded and never asked me about the little doll again.

My comlink chimed. I composed myself and picked the device up from the crate that served as my nightstand. "Doctor Saras here," I replied, my voice a perfect facsimile of calm.

"We've got a situation, doc," came a familiar male voice. It was Venner, a middle-aged Rebel who acted as an orderly in the infirmary.

I kept my tone level. "Is someone hurt?"

"Not yet," Venner replied. "We've...discovered an Imperial agent."

"Really?" I asked, fear rising in my chest. "Why are you calling me?"

Venner cleared his throat. "We need him scanned," he said. "For implants, that kind of thing."

"Yes, of course," I answered, somewhat relieved. "Where can I meet you?"

"The infirmary," Venner said. "Make it fast. We don't have much time."

"I'll be there," I reassured him before closing the link.

"Another agent?" I thought to myself. "Here?"

It was theoretically possible Imperial Intelligence had assigned another agent to infiltrate the base. It was a blessing in disguise, perhaps, that might throw my Alliance friends off my trail—assuming they were onto me at all. It would mean sacrificing a fellow agent, but no price was too high to ensure the Empire's stability.

I dressed quickly, grabbed my medical satchel, and hurried toward the infirmary. Several armed Rebels were waiting there. They stared at me, impassive. Immediately uncomfortable, I nodded to Venner. He looked back at me with unfeeling eyes. "Venner?" I asked, my voice shaking slightly. "What's going on?"

A human, strangely familiar, sat on one of the metal gurneys that served as a makeshift hospital bed. Where had I seen him before? Echoes of Coruscant swam in my head, but my training on the Imperial capital was a blur of indistinct memories and emotions. He stared back at me, sizing me up, then glanced to Venner and nodded. "That's her," he said.

"Who is this?" I protested. "What does he mean?"

"You know what he means, doc," Venner replied with a sigh. His voice was sad and tired.

"This must be a mistake," I balked, truly frightened now. "You can't possibly mean that I'm—"

I felt a circle of cold metal against the back of my head. I stood in shock, waiting for the nightmare to end just like it had countless times before.

But it didn't. My nightmare had only just begun.

Changing the Odds

"Are we there yet?"

Dannen looked at Purr. It was the fortieth time she'd asked him during this two-week trip through hyperspace, and it had been driving him nuts. This time, however, he had an answer for her.

"We should be coming up on Rafft soon," he said.

"Then we meet this... Rebellion?"

"Sort of. We're going to meet a group of Rebels who work out of this system."

Purr looked at the star lines. "What did you say they did?"

Dannen rolled his eyes. "I said they were guerrillas. They specialize in hit-and-run tactics - - they run in, blow something up, then leave."

Purr's eyes widened. "We're carrying bombs?"

"No, we're carrying medical supplies. Seems that their bacta tank malfunctioned and exploded, so we have a new one with some fresh bacta."

"The healing jelly?"

"Yeah. That and some other stuff. It's only medical supplies, Purr. We won't get blown up." At least, I hope not, he thought.

At that moment, the hyperdrive disengaged. The stars resumed their normal appearance outside the canopy, looking like diamonds surrounding the green sphere that hung in their midst.

Dannen checked his readouts, then nodded towards the planet. "That's it, Purr. That's Rafft."

As the Lifeline approached the globe, Purr glanced at Dannen curiously.
"What is the Rebellion?"

Dannen grimaced. "It's not something you can describe in a few words. You know what Imperial stormtroopers are?"

"The men in white armor?"

"Yes. Well, they are the law enforcement arm of the galactic government, which is controlled by a man called the Emperor. Well, there are some who believe that the Emperor is evil, and are trying to destroy him."

Purr thought about this. "Is he?"

Dannen looked at her. "Is he what?"

"Evil."

Dannen considered lying, but then chose the truth. "Yes, he is. He wants to control everything and everybody."

"Why don't you want to work for them?"

"What, the Rebellion? Well, it's a losing fight. The Empire is much too powerful for them. And, of course, if they find out that you work for the Rebels, they kill you." Dannen smiled ruefully. "Linkaas is one being who wants me dead. I don't need a whole government after me - - er, us."

Purr smiled at her inclusion. "So Krell arranged this for us? He must be a very good friend."

"Yeah, The best." Dannen gazed down on the planet, lost in thought...

* * *

"And that's the story, Krell."

Krell had stared openmouthed at Dannen, then at Purr, then back again. "I can believe it. Linkaas never was one for subtlety. So, what are you two doing here on Alderaan?"

"What I've always been doing. Looking for cargo to run. Moving cargo and staying out of his way."

"What about the Rebellion?"

"Rebellion?" Purr said.

"Long story - - I'll explain later," Dannen said. "I'm not interested in politics, Krell."

Krell rose to retrieve a fresh bottle from the refrigeration unit in his home's living area. "You have not heard? I have heard murmurings that the Empire is developing a special project," he said, leaning forward, his words becoming hushed. "And any special project the Empire develops certainly endangers the freedom of peace-loving worlds."

Dannen smirked. "Have you been taking Linkaas' spice? How do you know what the Empire's up to?"

"I have certain reliable friends who would have access to such information..."

"Look, Krell," Dannen said, "I just need a tip on where I can go to make some credits. I've known you for a long time - - you know everything. Give me an idea."

Krell thought, then looked at his longtime buddy. "Are you willing to work for the Rebellion?"

"What, full-time? Nope. You know I feel for them, but I don't usually get involved in politics." He deliberated for a moment. "Tell you what - - I'll move some cargo for them, but I'm not getting involved."

"All right, I will set up a meet. When I have something for you, I will leave a message. Are you at the spaceport?"

"Yeah, we can't exactly afford a posh suite," Dannen grinned.

"Of course, of course. Give it a couple of days; I will leave a message with the codeword at the port when I have something."

Dannen rose. "Good. Alderaan's a nice place to visit, but it's too close to the edge for me, you know?"

Krell smiled as he showed them to the door. "Yes, I do know."

* * *

And now they'd arrived. Rafft was a heavily forested planet, with several settlements dotting the planetscape. Checking the coordinates provided by Krell, Dannen angled the ship toward one of the smaller townships. He landed at the insignificant port, in a landing pit dug into the ground. A tiny tower stood over the other depressions, as if standing guard.

With a hiss, the ramp lowered and Dannen stepped out. "Stay with the ship, Purr," he called up into the ship. "I'll be back in a little while."

"No, I want to come with you," Purr said.

Dannen looked down into her blue eyes, then relented. "Okay, you can come. Just stay with me."

She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed his cheek. "I will, I promise!" Embarrassed, Dannen disengaged from the embrace, then led her to the landing pit's exit ramp.

They walked into the town, glancing at the small shops and houses as they walked by. Dannen paused, gazing into the window of a vehicle repair bay, then entered, motioning for Purr to follow.

The mechanic looked up, then crawled out from under the landspeeder he was working on. He was a little shorter than Dannen, but he was maybe 20 years older. Stuffing a dirty cloth into his coveralls, he approached the pair.

"May I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, you can. I was told to look for a mechanic named Ashe - - he's supposed to be the best on Rafft."

The man smiled. "I'm Ashe, young sir," he replied. "What can I do for you?"

Dannen smiled back. "I was told you can fix a frozen quarkmeter with a large hydrosponder with one hand tied behind your back."

Purr looked at the man, then at Dannen. "Really?" She looked at Ashe, respect shining in her eyes.

Ashe looked at her for a moment, then his smile disappeared. "Who are you?"

"Name's Dannen Lifehold." Dannen leaned closer. "Krell sent me."

"You have the supplies, then?"

"Yes, I do. Where would you like them?"

Ashe reached under the counter and pulled out a datapad. He typed for a minute, then removed the small mem-stik. "This has the planetary coordinates for the base," he said, extending it to Dannen. "Take the supplies there - - you'll get paid on delivery."

Dannen noted the sour tone the last words carried as he took the mem-stik. The man clearly thought he was a mercenary smuggler, only in it for the money.

Dannen wondered if Ashe might be right.

Purr caught the tone in Ashe's voice, and the look that he had given Dannen, but she made no mention of it as they walked back to the Lifeline. Dannen's silence spoke volumes to her, however - - she had been taught since birth to watch the body language of other beings, and to determine what they might do. Dannen was upset, she knew, but if she spoke, he'd just get angry. And that was the last thing she wanted. No, better to let him work it out for himself, she decided.

Inside, however, she smiled. Of course, if he needs my help, I'll be here.

* * *

The memory stick he'd been given directed him to a clearing about 200 kilometers outside the township. The clearing was large enough for the Lifeline to land, and still have enough room for the supplies. Telling Purr to stay put, Dannen disembarked, slowly stepping onto the soil. His blaster was in his hand as he gazed into the trees and bushes surrounding the clearing.

Suddenly, he sensed someone behind him. He whirled quickly, just in time to find the barrel of a blaster pointed at his face. The other person wore a uniform camouflaged for the forest, complete with breath mask, and suspicious eyes.

"Who're you?" the stranger asked in a voice distorted by the mask.

Dannen slowly raised his hands. "Name's Dannen Lifehold," he answered. "Ashe sent me."

"Do you have the mem-stik?"

Dannen slowly reached into his breast pocket and withdrew it. The stranger took the stick, examined it, then holstered the blaster.

"Who else is on board?"

"Just my mechanic."

"Do you have the supplies?"

"They're in the hold," Dannen said, lowering his hands.

The stranger produced a comlink from a pocket. "Leaf One to Base: all clear, bring the movers."

"Copy, Leaf One," a voice answered.

Leaf One reached up and removed the breath mask, releasing a mass of auburn hair and smiling blue eyes. She extended a hand to Dannen. "I'm Tawn Porew," she said. "Sorry about the ambush, but you're not our regular supplier."

Dannen shook hands with her as he led her to the ship. "Well, I got the job at the last minute. Wait a second." He raised his voice. "Purr, open the cargo hatch!" The docking ring promptly extended itself from the top of the ship.

Dannen sighed. "No, Purr, the button next to it!" With the customary hiss of hydraulics, the cargo hatch began lowering.

Tawn chuckled. "Your mechanic doesn't know your ship too well, does he?"

"She hasn't been with me too long. It's kind of a long story." He glanced back into the woods. "I hope you brought enough cargo lifters - - there's quite a bit of stuff."

"Don't worry, they'll be here." She sized him up. "You'll get your money when we've verified the inventory. You'll have to stay until we do."

"No problem," Dannen said. "Actually, I'd like to stay." He looked into the forest again. "When you've lived in space as long as I have, you appreciate planetfall... "

* * *

After the Rebels unloaded the Lifeline, Tawn and her commander took them to the base as the others moved the crates. It was fairly small, but cleverly hidden in a cave complex. There was just enough room for a small medical facility, bunks for 12, and an ammo dump.

"You have no ships?"

Tawn looked at Purr, then shook her head. "We just harass the Imperials on the planet we're assigned to, and try to set up Rebel cells."

Dannen blinked. "What would the Imperials want from here? From what I've seen, this isn't exactly the technological high point of the galaxy."

"The Empire is clearing land and building a garrison base," Tawn said. "We've been sabotaging equipment most of the time, and trying to find out why the Empire wants a base on Rafft."

"Wait a minute. With no ships, what happens if you have to evacuate?"

"We can't," Base Commander Peck told him. "The Rebellion doesn't have enough ships to outfit every outpost, so we are forced to go without."

"That's a little cold-blooded, isn't it?"

"That's how we operate. We knew it would be dangerous, but we believe in what we're fighting for." He looked at Dannen with disdain. "We don't do it for money."

"Now wait a minute... " Dannen bristled.

Peck turned away from him. "Sergeant Porew, unpack the supplies, verify them, then pay this -- person -- and get him out of here.

"We'd like to take a look around, six," Dannen said.

The commander looked at him coldly. "If it's all right," Dannen added hastily.

"Very well. Sergeant, show them around, but keep your eyes on them." With that, he strode off.

"Yes, sir," Tawn answered. She faced Dannen. "He's not big on mercenaries," she said.

"Why not?" Purr asked.

"Mercenaries killed the woman he loved."

Purr's eyes watered. "Oh, no."

Tawn put a hand on Purr's shoulder. "It was a while ago. Come on, I'll show you where you can get something to eat."

Dannen shook his head. "I'll help with the unpacking, if I can."

"Me, too," Purr piped up.

Tawn smiled. It was a lovely sight. "We can use the help. This way." She led them to a small area where the crates had been placed. Three Rebels were

already unpacking the supplies. They looked up as Tawn showed Dannen inside.

"This is the man who brought the supplies," she said. "And this is his partner. They want to help unpack."

The taller of the trio smiled. "Good, we can use it. Help me uncrate this bacta tank."

Dannen gave an answering smile. "You got it," he said, moving toward the crate. The man, who said his name was Colin, gave Purr a laser cutter, and showed her how to slice the packing material and not the precious cargo it protected. Once the crate was opened, Dannen, Tawn, and Colin muscled it out. Within half an hour the tank was upright and in its new location.

As they worked, Purr turned to Tawn. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why did you join the Rebellion? Why do you fight this Emperor?"

Tawn stopped working to answer Purr. "My parents were killed by the Empire," she said. Her eyes misted for a moment. "They refused to give up their land. So they were killed."

Purr gaped. "And the Emperor said to have them killed?"

"No. The Emperor is the head of the government. He's power-hungry. He wants to control the entire galaxy. He uses fear and terror to keep some planets in line. Others he simply sends in stormtroopers and destroys."

"But why?"

"Well, some planets have resources that the Empire needs, some have strategic value, and some he controls just to keep other planets in line." Tawn grimaced. "One planet, kept under control, will keep other planets - - sometimes whole systems - - from fighting back. And, since the Jedi are gone, the Rebellion's the best chance the galaxy has."

Purr's brow furrowed. "The Jedi?"

Colin spoke up, his voice full of reverence. "The Jedi Knights were the keepers of the flame of the Old Republic. They knew how to use the Force to fight for justice and truth."

"Yeah, but the Force didn't keep them safe from Vader," Dannen said.

"He betrayed them," Colin answered. "He took their trust and stomped on it."

"That's ancient history, Colin. Believe me, I wish the Jedi were still around, Force or no Force. They would give the Empire a run for its credits." Dannen handed the hydrospanner he was using to Colin, then sighed. "As it stands, though, I think you're fighting a losing battle. The Rebellion doesn't stand much of a chance."

"Is that what you think?" Tawn asked.

"Hey, don't get me wrong. I believe in what you're fighting for. I just want to stay alive."

"By being a smuggler? You have some strange ideas about staying alive, my friend," said Colin.

Colin helped Dannen move the bacta containers to the tank. The Rebel connected a wide hose from the container to the tank's inlet valve, and pressed the white "fill" button on the tank. There was a loud hiss as the valve inside the hose punched its way through the seals, then the gelled fluid began to seep into the holding tank.

Dannen turned to Tawn. "By the way, are you guys really expendable? I thought the Rebellion needed all the people it could get."

"Commander Peck feels we are. He believes in the Rebellion, as we all do, but he's from the old school."

Dannen grinned. "You mean the 'Come on, do you wanna live forever' type?"

"He's a good man," Colin said from behind the tank. "And he leads his people well. We've survived some tough situations without backup or evacuation plans, mostly due to his leadership."

"I'll take your word for it, Colin. But you'll understand if I don't like him too much."

Colin came around from the tank to stand next to Dannen. "That's quite all right - - sometimes I don't like him much either." He faced the tank. "You have no idea how badly we needed this bacta."

"I can guess. You folks have seen a lot of action, huh?"

Tawn answered. "Yes. We disabled a small Imperial shuttle last month." A grin lit her face as she remembered. "Delayed their take-off long enough for us to booby-trap their power cells. They blew up in hyperspace."

"But two men who were preparing the booby-trapped cells died when they exploded prematurely," said a new voice. They all turned to face Commander Peck, who had walked in. "If we'd had this-" he tapped the side of the tank "- - they would have survived."

Purr's eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

"Why should you be sorry? You're just a delivery service - - why should you two care?"

"Look, despite what you may think, we do care," Dannen snarled. "It's just that..."

Purr, who had been watching the bacta flow into the tank, suddenly tapped Dannen's shoulder. "What's that?" Purr asked, pointing into the bacta.

Colin squinted. "Looks like a piece of equipment." Quickly, he shut off the power, then climbed into the tank. He reached into the jelly and pulled out a fist-sized cube of metal. He hoisted himself out, wiping the gel from the cube.

"What is it?" Dannen asked.

"Don't know. Let's ask our tech expert." Colin tapped his comlink. "Baker to Thinker, do you read?"

"Thinker here, go ahead."

"We've found something in the bacta shipment - - want to take a look?"

"On my way," came the reply.

A minute later a short man with brown hair and a sour expression came in. He squinted up at Dannen and Purr for a moment. "You the smugglers?"

Dannen sighed, rolling his eyes. "Yes."

The shorter man smiled. "Thank you for the supplies. We owe you a debt worth far more than what you're being paid."

Dannen, taken aback by this unexpected kindness, simply nodded.

The short man turned to Colin. "Is that it?" he asked, indicating the cube.

Colin surrendered it to his comrade.

Thinker turned the object over in his hands for a few minutes, then looked at his commanding officer. "It's a homing beacon, sir."

"What?" Dannen said, incredulous.

Peck's eyes widened as he looked at Thinker. "You mean that this... man.. . has not only brought in medical supplies, he's brought in a blasted homing beacon?"

Colin looked dazed. "A homing beacon?"

Peck drew his blaster and whirled to face Dannen. "You scum. And I thought you were helping us. I thought that maybe I had been wrong, and that you have honor after all. How much are they paying you, bounty hunter?"

Dannen paled. "You think I did it?"

Peck glared at Dannen. "You knew we couldn't evacuate. You set us up, didn't you? Thanks to you, the Empire will be here soon!"

"No, I didn't! I swear I didn't know!"

Colin spoke up. "He didn't know, sir. He couldn't have known."

Peck spun to face Colin. "Why not?"

"Because the bacta case still had the original factory triple seals. He couldn't have inserted the homing beacon and kept the seals intact. He's just as much a victim as we are."

Peck considered this, lowering his blaster, then turned to Thinker. "What's the range of this beacon?"

"Short-range, probably in-system," Thinker replied. "We have an hour, maybe two."

Krell must've known, Dannen thought to himself. But why? Why would he set me up?

Another Rebel came running in. "Sir," he said, saluting Peck. "Report from the settlement: the Imperials are here on Rafft. Ashe reports a small squad of scout troopers in the settlement. Communications have already been severed."

"We'll never scatter in time!" Tawn said.

"Well, we can destroy the base, but we're expendable, Sergeant."

Purr touched Dannen's shoulder. He met her gaze, read the question in her eyes. He nodded to her, then looked back at Peck. "No, you're not," he said.

Peck's face reddened. "Now listen here, smuggler..."

"No, you listen, Commander," Dannen exploded. "You may think you're expendable, but there's always a chance to escape. I think I have a way to get you all out of here... provided, of course, that... "

"... That you get paid, of course," Peck interrupted him.

"No," Dannen countered, "provided that you have someplace in mind to go. Is there somewhere?"

"We don't have a ship, though," Colin said.

"No, but I do," Dannen answered. "It'll be a tight fit, and it'll be necessary supplies only, but I can manage if you all move fast, taking only what you need. Within an hour we all can be gone." He turned to Peck. "What do you say, Commander?"

Peck examined Dannen for a moment. "Let's get moving," he ordered.

Dannen turned to his partner. "Purr, get things started; we're leaving in an hour."

Peck caught his arm. "Why are you doing this? You're not getting paid to risk your life for us."

"That's true, Commander, I'm not."

"Then, why?" Thinker asked.

Dannen turned to the smaller man. "Because you have no choice," he said quietly. "And because it's the right thing to do."

* * *

Dannen had been correct. It was a tight fit, trying to squeeze 12 people and their equipment into the Lifeline. The cargo hold was stuffed to capacity, and both Dannen and Purr had to share their quarters with two other people each. But they were ready to lift off within an hour, just as Dannen had promised.

Tawn was worried, though. "Can you take off with all these people on board?"

"Sure we can," Dannen reassured her. "This is a YT-1300. The cargo capacity is about a hundred metric tons. If she can handle that, she can handle this."

Peck came up to them. "We are all ready. The coordinates for our new location are on this mem-stik," he said, handing it to Dannen.

"You still don't trust me, do you, Commander?"

"That has nothing to do with it," Peck sniffed. "I simply don't want any mistakes."

"Don't worry, Commander, I'll get you there. You have my word."

Peck snorted. "We'll see," was all he'd say.

Dannen sat down in the pilot's chair and looked over at Purr. "Okay, here we go," he said, powering up the ship. Slowly, the Lifeline lifted off and made for the open sky.

Shortly after they cleared atmosphere, Dannen slid the mem-stik into the nav computer. He turned to Peck, who was seated right behind him. "Okay, the computer's reading your coordinates, Commander. As soon as I'm lined up on the correct vector, we're on our way."

Suddenly, cannon fire rocked the ship. The Lifeline tilted dangerously to the left, throwing Purr out of her seat.

Dannen slapped the shield activator and checked the sensors. "We have company," he said.

"So it seems," Peck said. "You did set us up, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't," Dannen retorted, "and if you want proof, you'll find they'll kill me just as readily as they'll kill you." Another blast shook the ship, but this time the shields held.

Dannen glanced at Peck. "See what I mean?"

He checked the computer readout, then grabbed the hyperdrive activator levers. "Here we go!" he shouted, then pulled back on the levers sharply. The ship stuttered... then stalled.

"Damn," Dannen said.

"What's wrong?" Tawn asked.

Dannen flipped switches, then peered at a screen. "That first blast must have damaged the hyper-drive."

"I'll fix it," Purr said, running out the door toward the engineering hatch.

Tawn tapped his shoulder. "Can she fix it?"

Dannen paused, then nodded. "If she can't, no one can," he added. "In the meantime, let's give these guys a run for their credits." With that, he barrel rolled to the right, while checking the sensors.

Suddenly, a large shadow passed over the canopy. Tawn looked for the cause and gasped. "An Imperial Star Destroyer," she whispered.

"Yep," Dannen confirmed. "Looks like they want you guys really bad."

Tawn turned to Peck. "It's the Engager, Commander." She chuckled. "I guess Dalton's still unhappy about his face."

"What about his face?" Dannen asked.

"Captain Dalton was caught in one of our traps awhile back," Peck answered. "It cut his face up rather badly."

Dannen winced. "Ouch. No wonder he's upset."

"Rumor is he won't get the scar fixed until we're captured and executed. He uses his disfigurement to inspire those under his command."

"Actually, sir, I think it's an improvement," Tawn grinned.

"Perhaps, Sergeant. Can you outrun them, Lifehold?"

"Maybe, maybe not, Commander. But there's one thing this ship can do that theirs can't, and that's maneuver. Hold tight, everyone," he said, whipping the ship into a sharp bank.

"You see, Commander," Dannen continued as the commander picked himself off the floor, "it doesn't matter if I can outrun her, it's a matter of whether I can evade their tractor beams. To do that, I have to out-fly her long enough for Purr to fix the hyperdrive."

"Which reminds me... " He reached over and flicked a switch. "Purr, how bad is the damage?"

"Not too bad," came the reply. "I can fix it, but I need parts."

"Do what you have to do, Purr, just do it fast!"

"Don't worry, Dannen, I'll do it fast."

Dannen shut off the comlink. "Now, we wait," he said.

A turbolaser blast exploded just in front of him, and he banked straight up. "And fly," he added.

"I hope this mechanic of yours is good enough, Lifehold," Peck grumbled.

"Relax, Commander, she knows what... " At that moment, the main cabin lights went out. A split second later, the emergency lights came on, bathing the room in a red glow. "... she's doing," he finished.

"Are you sure?" Peck said sardonically.

Dannen pressed the comlink. "Purr, the ship lights just went out!"

"I know, I needed parts."

"From the lighting system?" Tawn asked incredulously.

"We're dead," Peck commented.

"With all due respect, Commander," Dannen growled, rolling the ship as he did, "shut up."

For the next few minutes, Dannen tried every trick he knew and some new ones to keep the Lifeline away from the Star Destroyer. He was right about one

thing: the smaller transport was far more agile than the ponderous cruiser. But it still took all he had to keep their distance.

Tawn checked the sensors and noticed with horror that the Star Destroyer had moved closer. "Dannen, we're running out of time!"

"Yeah, I noticed," he grunted. He slapped the comlink button. "Purr, how much longer?"

"Almost done, Dannen... almost done... done!" As she spoke, Dannen yanked back on the control levers, and the Lifeline shot into hyperspace.

Dannen sank back into his chair with a sigh. "See? I told you she could fix it." He glanced around the cabin. "We'll just have to go without lights for a while."

"But how did she do it so fast?" Tawn asked.

"I don't know - - I've given up trying to figure out how she does it." He turned and smiled out the canopy. "I'm just glad she does it."

* * *

The Lifeline arrived at the Vondarc system four days later. The group rendezvoused with a Rebel cargo frigate making its regular stop to pick up supplies from Alliance sympathizers in the area.

The Rebels from Rafft quickly transferred their gear and effects to the frigate, which was returning to the Rebel sector command base.

On board the frigate, Tawn and Commander Peck escorted Dannen and Purr to their quarters. The Commander, in gratitude, had ordered the repair of the Lifeline's hyperdrive, and Dannen didn't hesitate to accept.

The repairs would take all day, however, and rather than stay on their ship, Dannen and Purr joined the Rebels at mealtime and helped them transfer their gear to the cargo frigate.

Halfway through the day, Purr watched as Dannen paced the length of the rec room. "I still can't believe Krell did this!" "Set you up?"

"Yes, set us up! He was my oldest friend. We'd been through so much together. I can't believe he'd do it."

"Maybe he didn't."

Dannen paused. "You mean, someone else put the tracking beacon in there?"

Purr grimaced. "I have seen such badness with crime lords. They called it... umm... treachery?"

"So you think we were both set up - - me and Krell?"

"Maybe. Krell did seem like he was glad to see you."

"Yes, he did, didn't he?" Dannen muttered. "But still-"

His musings were cut short by the arrival of Tawn and Peck. Peck, for once, was smiling. "You'll be pleased to know, Captain, that the repairs to your ship have been completed, and you may leave at any time."

"Thank you, Commander. Again, I'd like to thank you for getting it fixed. "

Tawn smiled "It's the least we could do. You risked your lives for us, after all." She came over and stood next to him. "Are you sure you can't come with us? You and Purr would make excellent additions to the Rebellion."

Dannen shook his head. "I told you, I'm not ready to commit myself just yet. Besides, I have to get back to Alderaan and talk to Krell." He gazed out the window at the Lifeline. "We've got to be going."

"Well, we'll be sorry to see you go-" The commander was interrupted by Colin, who came up and saluted hastily.

Peck returned the salute. "What is it, soldier?"

"Sir, we've just received a report from sector 246."

"And?" Peck prompted when Colin hesitated.

"Sir, they report that... well... Alderaan has been destroyed, sir."

"What?" Dannen burst out.

Purr put her arm around Dannen's shoulder, and he gathered her into a tight embrace. "All those people... all those lives..." she murmured.

Peck's jaw almost stretched to the floor. "Destroyed? The whole planet?"

"Yes sir, the whole planet. Alderaan's gone, Commander."

"Krell said he'd heard something about a secret project the Empire was working on," Dannen's heart tightened.

"Rebel high command had one or two top operatives on Alderaan," Peck noted. "It's possible Krell was one of them."

"I'd bet the Empire has something to do with Alderaan," Dannen said.

Peck nodded soberly. "I'm sorry about your friend, Lifehold."

"Thank you, Commander," Dannen said. He glanced down at Purr, who nodded up at him, then faced Peck again. "The Empire has just changed the rules on you guys. I'd like to help even the odds if I can."

Colin gaped. "But I thought-"

Dannen cut him off. "You thought wrong, Colin. So, what do you say, Commander?"

Peck looked at him. "We can't afford to pay you what you're accustomed to."

Dannen approached Peck until their noses almost touched. "Is that what you think this is all about?" he asked, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Really? "

Tawn tried to take his arm, but Dannen wrenched it free. Peck looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I meant that-"

Dannen didn't let it pass. "Do you really think that I do things only for money? That I'm just a mercenary - - a man without principles who only believes in the almighty credit?"

Peck held his gaze. "To be honest, yes, that's what I think."

"Okay, then, I'm going to prove you wrong. Right here, and right now." Dannen drew himself to his full height. "I want to join the Rebellion as a transport pilot."

Tawn gasped slightly. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do, Tawn. Purr and I have talked about this before. We're both sure."

Peck regarded the younger man. "May I ask why? Because of your friend?"

"No," Dannen replied. "Because of Alderaan. Because of the innocent people. Because if the Empire could do this to one planet, they'll do it to another." He smiled slightly. "But mostly because it's the right thing to do."

Peck nodded, and smiled also. "Very well. Welcome to the Rebel Alliance, Captain Lifehold."

The Far Orbit Project

It is a dangerous time for the Rebel Alliance. Following the destruction of the Death Star battle station at the Battle of Yavin, the Emperor has ordered the annihilation of those who would oppose his rule. Vast fleets of Imperial ships have been dispatched to the far corners of the galaxy to root out and destroy Rebels wherever they can be found.

In this desperate hour, the Rebel Alliance needs supplies, equipment and weapons to pursue its mission of liberating the galaxy from the forces of tyranny. To further this goal, Mon Mothma and other Alliance leaders have issued Letters of Marque and Reprisal to a select group of private raiding ships: Rebel Privateers.

One of the first privateers to take up the dangerous mission of harassing Imperial ships is the Far Orbit, a captured Nebulon-B escort frigate crewed by a motley collection of Imperial mutineers and former pirates.

The captain of the Far Orbit, Dhas Vedij, was once a capable and respected officer in the Imperial Navy. Now, he has volunteered to spearhead a series of daring strikes into the Ringali Shell, deep in the heart of Palpatine's domain. But, unbeknownst to Vedij, an old enemy awaits him in the Core Worlds....

Captain Vocis Kenit, captain of the *Far Orbit*, did not strain against his captors as he was marched down the corridor to a hatch marked EMERGENCY USE ONLY. He was well aware of the destruction that the Imperial-issue blaster could wreak, and he currently had over a dozen of them aimed in his direction.

The captives—consisting of Kenit, a junior officer and a half-dozen disarmed Imperial Navy troopers—were herded to the end of the corridor. The leader of the group—still wearing an Imperial commander's uniform, Kenit noticed—stepped forward. "Blasters ready," he ordered sharply.

Kenit looked his second-in-command in the eye. "You will all die for this," he said, his voice a monotone. "You know what the Empire does to mutineers. We will hunt you down. Your families will be executed. And you, *Commander*," the captain spat, "will be subjected to the slowest torture that can be devised."

Commander Dhas Vedij faced his former captain and smiled without humor. "Perhaps," he said. "But you will not live to see it." Turning to his fellow mutineers, he gestured at the group of captives and issued his first command as the new master of the *Far Orbit*.

"Put them in."

The mutineers cycled the airlock open. Kenit and the rest of the prisoners, facing a wall of blaster muzzles, stepped reluctantly into the chamber beyond.

The lock cycled back and from his vantage point Kenit could see Vedij grip the release handle. Vedij took a moment to face Kenit and the others in the escape pod. Then he pulled the handle. There was the sharp crack of the docking clamps retracting, and a sickening lurch as the escape pod shot out from the *Far Orbit* like a falling star.

Kenit was hurled back into the mass of bodies behind him as the pod tumbled into the void.

"Open the shipwide comm," Vedij ordered.

"Ready, sir."

"Attention, all hands. This is the Captain Vedij speaking.

"As many of you will no doubt be pleased to learn, we have just put Captain Kenit off the ship. I'm sure that Imperial Command will treat him with as much care as he has shown all of us. He made various threats as to our inevitable fate, but I'm sure we can keep a few steps ahead of whatever they send against us.

"The Navy—in conjunction with ISB and COMPNOR—have developed profiles on 'typical'

mutineers. According to these files, all mutineers move towards the Outer Rim. I have decided to move towards the Core Worlds instead, in an effort to stay ahead of their search patterns and find a quiet shadowport to off-load those of you who decide to depart.

"Some of you may choose to fade away, join the Rebels or take up raiding. For those who wish to stay, know this: I intend to stick a lesson down the throat of the Empire, and hopefully make all the 'great minds' in the Navy, ISB and COMPNOR suffer for their arrogance. I hope you will join me.

"That is all."

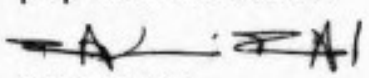
The Letter of Marque


BE IT KNOWN that Dhas Fenoep Vedij, owner of the raiding frigate FAR ORBIT (hereafter the **OWNER**), is now licensed and authorized by the Alliance to Restore the Republic (hereafter the **ALLIANCE**) by this Letter of Marque and Reprisal to conduct raids upon the Imperial government and its subsidiaries and supporters in the **RINGALI SHELL**, consisting of **BORMEA** and **DARPA** sectors; to seize their cargo, properties and vessels; to capture the personnel, officers, and officials of the Empire and its supporters, specified in the attached Schedule A; and deliver these goods, captives and prizes unto the Alliance. He is authorized and expected to pursue the war against the Empire as able, while in no case endangering the innocent civilian public and without causing undue damage to property.

The Owner shall surrender all bounty or proceeds of such activities to the review of the Alliance, and in return be awarded 50 percent of their value in credit or kind. The Alliance may choose to buy an entire cargo at its need. The Alliance shall also award bounties, paid according to a schedule published by the Alliance, for Imperial prisoners and confirmed destruction of Imperial properties. All slaves found in the course of duty shall be freed and all illicit substances destroyed.

The Alliance shall render such aid as it can, subject to availability and discretion, including shelter, intelligence, repair, supplies, and fuel. Those members of the vessel's crew, formerly political opponents of the Alliance, members of the Imperial Navy, mutineers and criminals, are hereby granted amnesty so long as they serve our cause, until the Empire is destroyed, or this Letter expires, provided they commit no further crimes. Should they do so, all charges will be held against them.

This Letter shall remain in effect for one year from its date, when it shall be reviewed. If either party is dissatisfied, the contract may be dissolved. The Alliance reserves the right to assign observers to the ship for the purpose of this review.


Ral'Rai Muvunc
Supreme Allied Commander
Ordnance and Supply



The Far Orbit

The Empire's solution to pirate and Rebel attacks on Imperial shipping was the Nebulon-B escort frigate. Overall, the Nebulon-B has performed admirably; kill rates have doubled since her introduction a few years ago. The ship is equipped with a superior sensor array, a long-range subspace transceiver, and facilities for two platoons of troops and two TIE squadrons.

The *Far Orbit* was, until several weeks ago, an Imperial ship operating in the Outer Rim. Her mission: guard Imperial transports from piracy and Rebel attacks. The *Far Orbit*'s former captain, Vocis Kenit, was a martinet and a bully, and his methods of maintaining discipline were an affront to several of his officers. Crew discipline was inordinately brutal—particularly to troops that had been pressed into service—and his treatment of captured enemies was even worse. Kenit's only saving graces were his political connections and

his insight into pirate strategies.

His second-in-command was Commander Dhas Vedij, a career officer with a Navy lineage going back to the very founding of the service. Vedij has watched the transformation of the Navy into the overfunded, overgrown creature in service to political hacks it is today. He watched as New Order officers were promoted beyond their abilities while capable officers with ties to the Old Republic—himself included—were kept out of command posts. Worse yet, he saw the Empire create dangerous instability in the galaxy by imposing its own twisted brand of "order."

Months ago, he made up his mind to strike back and take the *Far Orbit* out of Imperial service along with him. He gradually gathered support in the crew, waiting for the right mix of crew outrage. Then news of Alderaan's destruction reached the ship and an Alderaanian deckhand was arrested for suspected treason.

"Ops: Ships' status?" Vedij asked, leaning back in his chair. He had stripped the captain's ready room of Kenit's memorabilia and personal items, and had thus far left it undecorated. The room was stark and efficient.

"Sir, we are running at skeleton efficiency. The ship is sound and the crew's morale is up, but we can not operate effectively as a combat vessel. We lack the proper crew to fight."

"I see." Vedij mused for a moment. "Plainly we will have to take on crew or abandon the ship. I'd rather take on crew. I need this ship."

"Sir, perhaps the Rebels would buy it," offered the ops officer.

"They might if they had the money. Contrary to widespread reports, the Rebels have very little income. Their raids on our—excuse me—on Imperial shipping are limited to destroying isolated freighters and injuring the occasional escort..." Vedij's gaze focused on the far door as he reflected for a moment.

"Now there's an interesting idea," Vedij finished.

"Sir?"

"I think I've just figured out how to finance our little operation," Vedij said. "We may make the newsnet beamcasts come true, in a manner of speaking."

"Start combat-drilling the crew. We need to come up with working plans for operating in combat with a skeleton crew. See what engineering can do to automate sections where we're short on crew and select decks for mothballing. We are going to have to be on top of our form if this is going to work out. How long until we reach the StarForge Nebula?"

"Eighteen hours, sir."

"Plus seventy-two to find the Station, another seventy-two to locate and deal with the people I need. Ther, perhaps a week of negotiations."

"Sir?"

"You'll see, if you stay," Vedij said. "Otherwise, keep your eyes on the holonews. Get me a full report from all sections. Start weapons testing and shield-load balancing. I want us ready to respond to whatever we trip over and a complete picture of our situation."

"Yes sir!"

Captain Kenit entered the holopod of the *Stalwart* with his hands trembling. His mission was unsuccessful; he was unable to track the *Far Orbit* on the Rim. The traitor Vedij had evaded his attention and now he was summoned to contact his patron and report on his progress.

Kenit waited in the pod, kneeling, for ten minutes before the signal came through. To not be humble when the hoolink was established was unthinkable. The shimmer of the holotransmission settled into the form of the emaciated, dark figure that had come to haunt his dreams. Stray flecks of static flickered across the projection.

"Report your progress, Captain," commanded the wheezing voice of his master.

"Regretfully, I have found no sign of the *Far Orbit*, my lord."

"That is because she is now in the Ringali Shell. She was reported in the Esseles system two days ago. She has captured Imperial Advisor Veshiv, a valued and loyal servant of our master. You will go to the

Ringali Shell to locate the *Far Orbit* and carry out your mission. You will bring the *Far Orbit* to heel or pay the price." Pestage's whispery voice carried shadows of menace though the static and Kenit felt the hairs on his neck stand. "Do not fail your Emperor, Captain. You are well aware of the rewards of success...and the price of failure."

The holomage of Sate Pestage dissolved into nothingness. Kenit left the chamber and felt his heart start again.



Kenit's Final Reward

"Sir, the holopod is linked and ready." The communications technician stifled a yawn. He was the only tech on board with the clearance to operate the classified holopod, and had been dragged out of bed to establish the link.

Kenit stepped into the holopod with great confidence. His prey had *finally* made a fatal error. The *Far Orbit* had captured the *Emperor's Will*—seemingly a great prize, to be sure—but in Kenit's estimation, Vedij had sown the seeds of his own destruction. Vedij might have avoided Kenit for another half-year, but now he was doomed; the traitor had stolen a perfect tracker, one known only to a select few. Kenit himself wouldn't know about the unique property of Corusca stones if his brother weren't a gemologist specializing in rare jewels.

Under other circumstances, Kenit would have been fearful of a summons by the Grand Vizier, but today was *his* day. Pestage may be angry out the outset, but would be pleased once he heard the good news.

The holopod shimmered awake after only a few moments of activity. Kenit stood proudly, taking a brief moment to smooth his tunic. Turning to face the holographic figure, Kenit expected to see the now-familiar, robed figure of Sate Pestage. Instead, in simple dark robes, stood a stooped figure.

Kenit fell to his knees and abased himself. *Palpatine himself*, he thought. *Surely he isn't interested in this incident.*

Kenit's confidence evaporated as his skin prickled.

"Captain Kenit," the Emperor wheezed, his sickly voice still commanding fear and respect. Kenit could only nod weakly and croak out "...Majesty..."

"Captain, your efforts under the instruction of my good friend, the Grand Vizier, have come to my

personal attention." The Emperor's voice sighed like a cold draft across Kenit's heart. "I understand the *Far Orbit* has acquired a new prize."

"...yes, Majesty," Kenit answered weakly.

"Most unfortunate."

Kenit's heart paused with the Emperor's voice.

"The Grand Vizier has failed to locate this errant ship. He is being punished. You, on the other hand..."

Kenit's heart leapt.

"Rise. Look at me," snapped the Emperor.

Kenit lurched up. With great effort he looked up into the eyes of his monarch. The Emperor was older than he expected, with eyes as deep as space. Hypnotic eyes. Eyes that burned into Kenit's mind and focused on the most hidden corners of his soul.

"Your service is no longer required."



The communications tech glanced up, startled from the near-sleep he had fallen into. He thought he had heard a sound, a voice, but couldn't tell if it was a scream or crying or the squeal of machinery. He glanced at the holopod—still linked with the net—then chided himself for his momentary lapse. Holopods were sealed so that no energy, no sound, no hint of the highly classified communication could leak out.

"Hmph. Must have fallen farther asleep than I thought," he muttered. "Screaming. Heh. Must have been a dream."

He checked that the pod was functioning normally, and poured a cup of caf. Vigilance was required for these holopod links. They could last for hours, and whoever was on the other end would be very annoyed if the link was accidentally broken.

Starfall



A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

A group of Rebel agents has been assigned to accompany the great engineer Walex Blissex, designer of the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, to Kwenn space station. Blissex, now a respected member of the Alliance, received a message from his son-in-law, Imperial Governor Denn Wessex, claiming that the engineer's daughter is near death. Even though it appeared to be a trap, Blissex could not pass up this last chance to reconcile with his daughter.

Whether Lira Wessex, who designed the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer based upon her father's previous work, is truly dying or not seems inconsequential. Upon reaching Kwenn, Walex and his Rebel escorts were captured and placed in the custody of Captain Kolaff, commander of the *VSD Subjugator*.

Now, trapped within the detention block of the powerful ship, the Rebels have little hope of escape. They can only wait for the eventual return of their captors and the terrible interrogator Droid that is sure to accompany them...

INTERIOR: SUBJUGATOR BRIDGE. Standing before the massive viewports of the command bridge, a high-ranking Imperial officer looks out upon the damage his ship has sustained. His eyes slide slowly across the deep gashes and the twisted superstructure, resting momentarily upon a black scar that slices the forward hull. An explosion rips through the wounded ship from somewhere deep inside, throwing the bridge crew from side to side. But the officer stands firm before the viewport, oblivious to the discomforts of his men.

"It doesn't look very promising, does it Captain Kolaff," asks the woman who now stands beside him. She wears the regal garb of an Imperial official, retaining an air of authority even though the outfit is stained and torn.

"Promising, my lady!" replies Kolaff. "We are about to win a great victory against our enemies."

The official laughs, but there is no humor in her voice. "Victory? Captain, that pirate fleet caught you off guard and devastated your vessel. I do not see running away as a victory."

*A dangerous gleam sparkles in Kolaff's piercing eyes. "Not running, my lady, tactically retreating. They have damaged us beyond repair, that is true. But I have a surprise being readied for those pirates. They will find the price of dealing with *Subjugator* to be more expensive than they can afford."*

The official smiles evilly. "With my help, of course, Captain."

"Of course, my lady."

Fade to...

INTERIOR: SUBJUGATOR CORRIDOR AND A SMALL GROUP OF REBELS.

1st Rebel: Well, all things considered, it could be worse.

2nd Rebel: We're locked in a detention cell in the middle of a Victory-class Star Destroyer with no equipment and no weapons. How could it possibly be worse?

3rd Rebel: We could be dead.

GM (as voice over cell comlink): Attention prisoners. Interrogation will begin shortly. We hope that you will be as uncooperative as our last "guests."

4th Rebel: I'm not so sure that would be worse.

5th Rebel: I've got a bad feeling about this. . .

6th Rebel: Maybe if you had this "bad feeling" before convincing us to volunteer for this mission we might not be in this mess.

3rd Rebel: Yeah, when an Imperial Governor sends holotapes all over the galaxy to contact a well-known Rebel, it should set off a few warning lights.

5th Rebel: The Governor sounded sincere to me. Just a guy whose wife was dying, and her last wish was to see her father before she took The Final Jump. What's so unusual about that?

6th Rebel: Her father just happens to be Walex Blissex, designer of the Victory Star Destroyer and now an important member of the Alliance

2nd Rebel: Speaking of Blissex, where do you think they've taken him?

1st Rebel: I think he's still somewhere in the detention center. I overheard some guards talking about it.

3rd Rebel: Well there's not a whole lot we can do about it just now.

4th Rebel: What do you mean? We've got to escape.

5th Rebel: That's right. Those Imperials just warned us that they're on their way. . .

2nd Rebel: And they'll probably have an interrogator Droid with them!

4th Rebel: But what can we do about it? They outnumber and outgun us, and that Captain Kolaff character sounds like a real Rancor.

1st Rebel: Yeah, the way he calmly "invited" us all aboard his ship back at Kwenn kinda' gave me the creeps.

6th Rebel: Listen, we're still got Dr. Blissex on our side, if we can find him.

5th Rebel: Right. If we do break out, he might know a way to get out of this Imperial monstrosity.

3rd Rebel: Wait a minute! You want us to go up against an entire Star Destroyer?

2nd Rebel: I like the odds. . .

*:VSD Subjugator***Priority Command D-113***
:Restricted Access***Security Code D-1228-H
:Command Clearance Only
:From: Captain Kolaff, Command: VSD Subjugator
:To: Chief Engineer Juren***Your Eyes Only
:Effective Immediately*

Readings on bridge indicate 67 percent power loss throughout ship. Two of six power cells operational. Main and auxiliary deflector screen generators destroyed. Power available to remaining weapons systems nominal. Starfighter complement 97 percent depleted. Crew casualties 64 percent.

It is therefore my decision to reroute all available power to engine control core. Main and auxiliary hyperdrive and sublight engines to be rigged for self-destruct. Three-hour delay posture. Implosion sequence will be programmed from bridge and transmitted for reception and implementation by you at engine control core. Clear engine control of all personnel not essential to this operation. This is a priority command. I want no leaks. I am holding you personally responsible for the success of this operation.

*:Transmit Priority Command D-113
:Priority Command D-113***Time: 03.00.00 and counting***
:Kolaff out.*

:Priority Command D-113 * *Time: 02:03.45 and counting* * **

:VSD Subjugator Battle Report 1213

:Logged by: Captain Kolaff, Commander, VSD Subjugator

Enemy Force encountered outside Iwenn system. Originally believed to be pirate raiding group, now confirmed as Rebel task force by intercepted communications.

Makeup of enemy force: 1 Rebel Star Cruiser (Mon Calamari), 1 Rebel Escort Frigate (Nebulon B), 4 Rebel Corvettes (Corellian). First aggression: Rebel. Motive for attack Unknown. Possible relation to prisoners, but unlikely. Action taken: Standard defensive posture. Enemy response: Heavy bombardment from all ships. Action taken: Return bombardment, concentration on Cruiser. Enemy response: Cruiser retreats. Action taken: Advance on Frigate. Enemy response: Crissfire from Corvettes. Action taken: Controlled ramming of Frigate, tractor beam focus on Corvette #2. Enemy response: attempted retreat. Action taken: Corvette propelled into Cruiser. Enemy response: Combined fire from all ships. Action taken: Standard tactical retreat. Enemy response: Retreat and regroup. Conflict evaluation: Inconclusive.

Current Battle Status: Enemy approaching at sublight speed after effecting repairs. Probable attack range in 02:03:45. Preparing effective response while playing dead-in-space (see Priority Command D-113). Report logged and readied for probe launch as we remain under communications blackout.

:Priority Command D-113 * *Time: 01:07.21 and counting* * **

:Restricted Access * *Security Code D-1228-1*

:Command Clearance Only

:From: Captain Kolaff, Commander, VSD Subjugator

:To: Hangar Deck Officer Lieutenant Klito * *Your Eyes Only*

:Effective Immediately

Prepare command shuttle for departure, hangar bay G-12. Time of departure, 00.47.00 minutes. Shuttle crew and two squads of troops to be ready and waiting at time of departure. Three units of reserve fuel, three months consumables and two astromech Droids to be loaded aboard as well. Clear hangar bay G-12 of all non-essential personnel. This is a priority command. I want no leaks. Do not fail me.
:Kolaff out.

:Priority Command D-113 * *Time: 00:00.00 and counting* * **

:Sensor alert * *Warning!* * *Volatile energy overload off rear center arc, approximately .35 sublight units distant. Deflector shields automatically engaged. Brace for impact.*

:Shields holding firm. Damage superficial.

:Sensor Alert * *Vessel detected off front left arc, approximately .52 sublight units distant. Identification files confirm craft as Lambda-class shuttle bearing Imperial markings. Communication detected. Relaying. . .*

:To: Governor Denn Wessex, Belgim Sector

:From: Lira Wessex, shuttle Tatum

Escaped unharmed, but mission unsuccessful. My Father has escaped me again. Rendezvous at prearranged coordinates in 04.00.00. All my love.

-Lira Wessex

:Sensor Alert * *Shuttle Tatum engaging hyperdrive. Shuttle entering hyperspace. Projected trajectory uncertain.*

INTERIOR: ATTACKING FLAGSHIP, BRIDGE.
The camera slowly pans across a battered Mon Cal Cruiser, zooming in to look upon the bridge. Sparks fly from a freshly-welded control panel as crew members bustle in and out of the frame. The shot finally comes to rest upon the stoic figure of Captain Torrie, commander of the fleet that attacked Subjugator. A medical Droid bandages a bloody wound on Torrie's right arm.

"Repair status," order: the captain.

"Almost there, sir," an aide responds. "Power is up to 50 percent in the remaining ships, we have basic sublight drive capability, and all but one ship have minimal shields."

"And Subjugator?"

"No discernible improvement," replies the aide, "she seems almost dead in space."

A sturdy smile creeps across the captain's face as he engages the fleet-wide comlink.

"Task Force Starfall, this is Starfall leader. Prepare to attack. I repeat, prepare to attack."

Wipe to...

INTERIOR: SUBJUGATOR ENGINEERING SECTION.

INTERIOR: *SUBJUGATOR* BRIDGE. *Framed against a sea of stars, Koloff peers anxiously out the giant viewport. At his right, the female Imperial official scowls impatiently.*

"They're coming," the captain says, "I can feel them drawing closer."

"The Rebel fleet does not concern me," snaps the official. "Only Walex Blissex interests me."

"Blissex and his Rebel cohorts are dead. I am sorry for the inconvenience his will cause you, but even now my stormtroopers search the lower levels for their bodies."

The official smiles coldly. "You fool. They are not dead. They simply escaped your foolish trap. You are a pathetic commander who must rely on wild schemes and inane plottings to make up for your lack of military competence."

Without turning to face her, Koloff calmly replies, "Assuming that you have done what I asked of you and done it correctly, you will soon see what military competence is. As for Blissex and the others, if they have survived I will have them back in custody before time expires."

"I hope so, captain," her answer drips poisonously from her scarlet lips, "for your sake."

Cut to. . .

INTERIOR: *SUBJUGATOR* DROID ACCESS CORRIDOR.

Your subspace com-units crackle to life, and a strong, calm voice addresses you. "This is Starfall leader calling Imperial shuttle. As everything you told us seems to be correct, including the recent destruction of *Subjugator*, please feel free to come aboard our flagship as personal guests of the Alliance.

May the Force be with you. Captain Torrie out."

The Quality Of Mercy

Keldon hurried toward the Commander's office. The harried medic stopped outside the door, mentally and physically pulling himself together before facing the old man. The news was grim, far worse than they had thought in the beginning. Could all this have started only 12 hours ago? Keldon himself was the only medic still in good enough condition to fulfill his duties. The medical droids had assumed total care of the 40 patients who filled sick bay. The 100 or so less severe cases were staying in their living quarters, ostensibly to halt the spread of the plague. From the tests he had just finished, Keldon knew that strategy was doomed. So were all the personnel on the base unless someone could go for the medicine they needed and return in time. He could hear the agonized coughing from within the office and knew the Commander was gravely ill too. He knocked and entered, and after suppressing his shock at Commander Astred's appearance, gave him the report and his recommendation.

"We can't send anyone," Astred paused to cough. "At the rate this thing is progressing, anyone from the base would be too ill to continue within hours. We'll have to hope that some of our supply ships return early. They can't be allowed to land, however; we'll have to send them a message explaining the situation. Is anyone left in communications? Blast, then we two will have to do it. Come on, Keldon, we have to get the droid set up with a continuous broadcast message before we collapse too. Then all we can do is wait—and hope."

Stranded

Day turns to night quickly on the flat plateaus of Karra. Soon the darkness is broken only by the fire burning between the village huts and your ship as you, Dr. Nardah, and his assistant gather with the natives for your evening meal.

Politely — as Dr. Nardah has requested — you force yourself to eat the coarse gruel the villagers have prepared for you, a thick concoction of foul-tasting tubers served in a smooth clay bowl that cools your hands despite the heat of its contents.

As you eat, you watch Tist, one of the largest of the aliens, continue his fascination with your weapons, awkwardly manipulating a blaster rifle with his long-fingered hands.

You cringe as he raises the rifle to fire, knowing that, as he has every time before, he will miss his target. Your only hope is that no one is injured.

But he does not fire.

Instead, he throws the rifle to the ground. "Useless," he tells you. "We will defeat the Imperials with our own strengths."

Dr. Nardah — who has developed the skill of eating the gruel as if he truly enjoys its taste — sniffs loudly, a gesture of comfort that he has taken from the natives. "Friend," he says, "you cannot hope to defeat them without our help."

"But we will," Tist answers, "as we always have. We have always conquered, and we always will." The other Karran warriors flick their tongues and hum, signalling their agreement.

Dr. Nardah stands and walks to Tist's side. They are an odd pair, the slight, white-haired Human contrasted with the tall, black-furred alien. Dr. Nardah slaps at the Karran with his forearm, another gesture of the natives, this time one of companionship. "We are brothers, it is only proper that we offer you assistance."

"But we will show you, Doctornardah, we will show that we have strength, then we will offer our assistance to you," Tist answers again. "We will attack. We will destroy the Imperials, as our ancestors destroyed all those that opposed them."

You laugh, quietly, to yourself. If only it were that easy.

The Last Hand

"Sabacc!"

Doune's resounding laughter echoed through the gambling hall, the Herglic's huge body shaking with the effort. "You lose again, boy."

Vee-Six, Doune's droid, quickly calculated his master's winnings and enthusiastically reported the total for all to hear.

The gathered crowd cheered as the Herglic claimed the pot, leaving Nyo with a single credit to his name.

The young man lowered his head in disbelief, fighting back tears. How could I have been so stupid? Nyo thought as he stared at the lone cred chip that constituted all the money he had in the galaxy. Now, all hope was gone.

"Doune... the great gambler. Able to steal the money from a poor farmboy with ease. I suppose you are equally skilled at firing your heavy blaster on unarmed opponents."

The bold words silenced the room.

The Herglic looked up in shock, searching the sycophantic circle of admirers who always clung to winners for the dissonant voice.

The spectators parted for the cloaked figure as if he were a thermal detonator. A large hood kept the stranger's face in shadow, but the dark visage was obviously focused on the Herglic.

"You think you could do better, friend?" Doune asked, a dangerous edge in his deep voice.

The figure gestured to the crowd. "I wouldn't want to embarrass you in front of all your... friends."

"I never turn away anyone so obviously willing to lose his money to me," Doune chuckled. "Sit down."

The stranger paused for a moment, then slid into the empty seat. "Very well. I must warn you, though..."

The Herglic cocked an eyebrow. "Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess." Doune gestured dramatically. "You're the greatest gambler who ever lived, right?"

"Actually, I was just going to say that I don't have any money on me, but now that you mention it..." The stranger lowered his hood, eliciting a collective gasp from the spectators. "I am."

The stranger's close-cropped hair was white, though streaks of silver snaked their way through the ivory. His eyes were pale violet, like tropical flowers that had withered and lost their luster. A jagged scar wound its way around his lip, cutting an unnatural line up past his nose. With stony features reminiscent of a royal statue, the man was undeniably handsome; however, that wasn't the reason for the crowd's reaction.

The whispers had begun, and the buzzing made it seem as if a colony of insects had descended upon the room. Throughout the snatches of conversation in the multitude of languages, two words were repeated with frightening frequency.

Kinnin VoShay.

Doune's thick flesh had begun to mottle, a sure sign the Herglic was agitated.

"This is nothing but a trick, Master." Vee-Six leaned forward, eyes flashing as his databanks began recalling information. "The Ashanda Ray was reported lost in the Tyus cluster half a century ago. If Kinnin Vo-Shay. had survived, which is highly unlikely, he would be well over one hundred standard years old. The man was lucky, but he was no Jedi."

"It would seem you are not who you appear to be, after all." Doune seemed to calm down a bit, his usual predatory smirk returning to his face. "I must admit, though, the resemblance is uncanny. You must have paid a fortune on cosmetic alterations. No wonder you're broke."

A nervous chuckle escaped the crowd.

"For such a renowned gambler, Doune, you're a much faster dealer of opinions than cards." The stranger leveled his piercing gaze. "Perhaps you win by talking until your opponents die of sheer boredom."

"The one thing I never deal in is charity," the Herglic said, a note of irritation creeping into his voice. "Until you ante up, there will be no game. "

That drew a mixed reaction from the crowd. Many wanted to see if the stranger really was telling the truth, and there was only one way to decide that....

"But, Doune, what if he really is Vo-Shay?" one brave soul asked.

The Herglic had had enough, and his blubber shook with fury. "I don't care if he's Jabba the Hutt. Without money, he doesn't play!"

A single credit spun through the air, shimmering in the dim glowlights. Without blinking, Vo-Shay plucked the cred from its flight with practiced ease. He slowly turned to face his surprise benefactor.

Nyo started to say something, but Vo-Shay offered a wink that was so quick the young man was scarcely sure he saw it at all.

"From one loser to another... how appropriate. Are you ready, then?" Doune demanded.

Vo-Shay's face lost all expression, resembling a droid that had been abruptly powered down. Those strange eyes took on a faraway look, as if they were staring into eternity. He spoke only a single word, but it sent a chill down the spine of every being present who had one.

"Deal," Vo-Shay said.

The room grew deathly quiet.

And the game began....

Doune slid a blubbery fin across his forehead, which was glistening with perspiration. The Herglic examined his cards and grunted softly. His pile of credits was steadily decreasing, while Vo-Shay's lone credit had gained thousands of friends in less than an hour. He glanced up at his opponent, but the human gambler's face may as well have been carved out of ferrostone.

Only Vo-Shay's right hand was in motion, absently twirling the obsidian stone pendant hanging from his neck. When he had first removed the bauble from underneath his shirt, a collective gasp resounded from the crowd. The necklace that was rumored to be the source of the legendary gambler's astonishing luck. It was yet another piece of evidence that suggested that this man was really who he claimed to be.

The Herglic watched his shifting sabacc cards and nearly grinned. The Four of Coins had reformed into the Mistress of Staves, with a value of thirteen. He already held the Nine of Staves. Doune dramatically pushed the metallic cards into the neutral stabilizer field. "Twenty-two."

Vo-Shay began laying out his cards. The Ace of Flasks, the Master of Flasks, and the Nine of Flasks. A total of thirty-eight. A low murmur rippled through the crowd. Nyo winced and looked away. The gambler was about to go bust.

Chuckling, the Herglic reached for the pot... fifteen thousand credits.

Vo-Shay played one more card into the neutral field. The Evil One. Negative fifteen. That brought his hand down to twenty-three. "Sabacc," he said, grabbing Doune's hand just as it reached the thick stack of credits at the center of the table. "I believe that's mine."

The Herglic snarled. "Your luck cannot last forever, impostor."

But it did.

In another hour, Vo-Shay held over one hundred thousand credits. The crowd not only began to believe, they had completely shifted allegiance. Vee-Six was the lone supporter remaining in Doune's corner, and the droid was not exactly encouraging. "Please, Master," Vee-Six implored, "you must end this before-
was

"Shut up!" the Herglic roared, shoving the droid away. He slammed a cred stick onto the table. "One more, human... double or nothing."

"Don't risk it," Nyo whispered, eyeing Vo-Shay's winnings. "Let's just cut and run."

The gambler smiled, his pale violet pupils dilated with excitement. "I never back down from a challenge." He eyed his opponent. "Ready?"

Doune nodded, nostrils flaring.

The gambler spun the obsidian pendant on its chain, and the stone danced as if it were alive. More than one observer found himself transfixed by the sight as Vo - Shay reached for his cards....

Nyo and Vo-Shay walked out of the gambling hall with nearly a quarter of a million credits.

The young man was so excited, he couldn't stop talking. "If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it."

"Well, Doune actually played the game and I'm betting he still isn't sure what happened." The gambler patted the youth on the back and handed him the small electronic stick containing two hundred thousand credits.

"All yours, my boy. I kept the change for expenses... hope you don't mind."

"Are you kidding?" Nyo's hand was shaking as he held the cred stick. "I can't thank you enough for this... you've literally made my dreams come true."

"That's a lot of money you've got there." Vo-Shay studied the young man. "You obviously don't frequent places like that, so I'm assuming you were trying to win for a reason."

Nyo glanced off into the distance, shuffling his feet uncomfortably.

"Sorry... I have a bad habit of sticking my nose in where it's not welcome. Curiosity is just one of my many vices, but it gets me in trouble more than any of the others." The gambler squeezed Nyo's shoulder. "Whatever it is, I hope it works out for you."

Vo-Shay pulled up the hood of his cloak and effortlessly slid into the crowd.

"Wait!" The gambler turned, just as the youth caught up. "If you hadn't been nosy back there, I'd be walking home with one credit in my pocket... can we talk?" Nyo glanced around the bustling street. "In private?"

Vo-Shay shook his head and laughed. "Now you've gone and done it. I never could pass up a good confidential chat." The gambler gestured to a dingy cantina in the distance. "After you..."

The duo sat at a booth in the rear of the cantina, with a bottle of Corellian whisky and a good deal of space between themselves and the next patrons. Vo-Shay blended in so well with the shadows that it seemed as if Nyo was sitting alone at the table.

The gambler downed another shot of the tangy drink and stared at his companion. "Well, have you imbibed enough liquid courage, yet? Or am I going to be sitting here all night?"

Nyo chuckled, then grew serious. "Are you really Kin nin Vo-Shay?"

"Last I heard."

"Then how is it that you're-was

The gambler held up a gloved hand. "I thought we were here because you wanted to reveal your secrets...."

"Point taken." The young man took a drink and then a deep breath. "The reason I need the money is-promise not to laugh?"

"I never make promises, son. I only deal in cards. Not words."

Nyo didn't respond. He was staring into his glass, as if mesmerized by the smooth contours. After a few more moments of silence, he finally spoke. His voice was a whisper. "I want to buy a lightsaber."

The gambler's eyes widened. "Really?"

"You think it's stupid."

"No! That's just the last thing I expected to hear. I figured it was something more mundane... a sick family member in need of an expensive operation, a beautiful girl you couldn't afford to marry, maybe a debt to a nefarious crime lord."

Nyo shook his head. "No, nothing like that."

"So where do you intend to pick one up? They're not exactly standard stock for equipment shops, you know."

"I've heard about a black-market dealer who has one for sale."

"Where?"

Nyo was obviously reluctant to answer.

"Come on, son," the gambler said, reaching for his glass, "it's not as if I'm going to race there ahead of you and snatch it up...."

"Nar Shaddaa."

Vo-Shay nearly spat out his drink. "The Smuggler's Moon!" The gambler narrowed his eyes and gave the young man an appraising glance. "Just how old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty standard years," he said proudly.

"And you've lived here on Morado all your life. Have you ever been offworld before?"

"Well, no... but I've seen plenty of holos-was

Vo-Shay burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Nyo said, obviously annoyed.

"Nothing! What could possibly be funny about a boy who's never been off his home planet traveling by himself to one of the most dangerous hives of scum

and villainy in the galaxy with two hundred thousand credits on him to purchase an illegal weapon from a shady black-market dealer?" He leaned forward. "Are you even carrying a blaster?"

The young man's silence answered his question.

The gambler wiped tears from his eyes. "By the Force... you must be either an overconfident fool or a half-wit. Your star may be fiery, but it isn't going to burn long in this galaxy if you keep up this sort of behavior."

Nyo abruptly stood, slamming his fist against the table. "I don't need a lecture! Especially not from somebody who's supposed to be dead because he was too lazy to pilot his ship around an extremely dangerous area of space..." The young man started to leave, but wasn't through yet. "And you may be the greatest gambler who ever lived, but you have a lot to learn about dealing with people. See you around." With that, Nyo promptly stormed out of the cantina.

You never change, do you. Shay? The disembodied voice was hauntingly beautiful, caressing the gambler's cheek like a cool breeze.

"Listen," Vo-Shay took a final swig directly from the whisky bottle and walked to the door, "if you want to put your two credits in, just leave them on the table... I don't have change for a tip."

"So, how much for passage to Nar Shaddaa?"

The Barabel captain quickly calculated his figure, then grinned at Nyo. With all those sharp teeth, it wasn't a comforting sight. "Twenty-five thousand. Paid in advance. No refund under any circumstances..."

The young man stumbled over his words. "... I don't know. That seems like an awful lot."

"That's because it is."

Both the Barabel and Nyo looked up at the new voice. Vo-Shay stood at their table, arms folded across his chest. "The boy could get a better deal from alawa... and on something far nicer than the garbage scow you're passing off as a tramp freighter."

Enraged, the captain stood, towering over the gambler. "You insult me.... "

"No. You insult him," Vo-Shay said, indicating Nyo. "And if you want to live to prey an another easy mark, I suggest you leave immediately. Or else you'll be insulting me."

Barabels, however, are not easily intimidated. "And why should I care about that, little man?"

Vo-Shay shifted his position slightly, flashing the two hold-out blasters he held tucked under arms.

The captain snorted and took a threatening step forward, "I could make you eat those."

"If you were that good, you'd have already done it instead of just talking about it," the gambler said, refusing to give up a centimeter of ground. "Now go; find some nerfs to herd."

The Barabel shoved past Vo-Shay and slipped into the crowd milling around the bar.

Still chuckling, the gambler slipped the blasters into his cloak and dropped into the vacated seat.

"What do you want now?" the young man asked.

"Just to talk."

Nyo started to get up. "I don't have anything else to say to you."

Vo-Shay reached out and quickly yanked him back into his seat.

"Hey! Lemme go..."

"Not until you've heard my offer."

"What kind of offer?"

"I'll fly you to Nar Shaddaa."

Nyo couldn't believe it. "Why would you do that?"

"To make sure you get there without dying," the gambler said, rocking back in his chair. "And so you can pay me ten thousand credits."

It didn't take him long to consider the offer.

"Deal," Nyo said, smiling.

"Let's get going, then."

The young man was already headed for the door, giddy with excitement. "I can't believe this...."

Vo-Shay shook his head as he followed Nyo out. "Join the club," he said softly.

"There she is." The gambler's voice was filled with the pride only a parent or ship captain could ever know.

Nyo stepped into Docking Bay 49 and his mouth promptly fell open. "The Ashanda Ray..."

The two men circled the graceful curves of the light freighter. Vo-Shay carefully slid a hand along her smooth underbelly. "She was designed by a good friend of mine... a Mon Cal engineer with a great eye."

Like most ships designed by the Mon Calamari, the Ray was a model of efficiency, structural strength, and aesthetic appeal. More than a spacecraft, it resembled a handcrafted piece of art. With myriad pods, bulges, and bumps, the ship almost appeared organic rather than constructed-like a great ocean-dwelling creature.

"She can be a headache for maintenance and repair, but other than that... "

"Quite a beauty," Nyo agreed, "but I don't see any weapons... or sensors. Or anything."

"What would an exotic woman be without her secrets?" The gambler laid an arm around the young man's shoulders. "Now come on... let's go get your lightsaber."

Exhausted from his exploits, Nyo spent most of the trip in one of the Ray's extremely comfortable bunks.

Vo-Shay was resting in the cockpit, half asleep himself. The ship would warn him if anything came up, and the smoothly accelerating starlines of lightspeed always made the gambler drowsy. When he heard the lilting voice, he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not.

You definitely have your moments.

His eyes popped open. Definitely not dreaming...

"Was there ever any doubt in your mind?"

Do you want me to be honest, or nice?

"Nice," Vo-Shay grinned. "So, what's the word?"

It's hard to say right now. I need more time.

"Don't we all."

He's coming.

Vo-Shay craned his neck up over the top of the chair. "Well, well. Look what the gundark dragged in...."

Nyo entered the cockpit, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He unceremoniously plopped down into the copilot's seat. "Are we there yet?"

The gambler checked his displays. "Almost You get some rest?"

The young man nodded, surveying the cockpit.

"Good." Vo-Shay leaned back in his chair, absently twirling his pendant. "You'll need to keep your eyes wide open in a place like Nar Shaddaa. Bad things can happen to people faster than you can even think about pulling your blaster."

"That's okay," Nyo answered with a grin. "I don't have one, remember?"

The gambler chuckled. After a few moments, he grew serious and turned to face Nyo. "You never told me why you wanted a lightsaber."

"You never told me how you survived your untimely demise in the Tyus cluster," the young man countered evenly, "or how come you're not over a hundred years old."

"An even exchange, huh? Okay, but I asked first."

The gambler immediately recognized that distant look that crept into ationyo's eyes. It was the one that always prefaced the resurfacing of a lifelong dream and usually culminated in trouble.

"I want to become a Jedi Knight," the young man said in a voice just above a whisper.

The gambler was silent for a moment "I thought they built their own lightsabers when they were actually ready to wield one...."

That seemed to deflate Nyo slightly, but he quickly recovered. "I just wanted to have something... connected with them. I mean, it's not like there's anyone around to train me. I don't know...." He stared out the viewport, at the stars rushing past. "I guess I thought that if I felt a lightsaber in my hands, there'd be some kind of magic, you know? You have to take your first step somewhere, and this was the only path I could find."

Well spoken, young one.

"Huh?" Nyo snapped out of his reverie and glanced back at Vo-Shay. "Did you say something?"

"Wasn't me," the gambler said with a wink.

"So, I held up my end of the bargain... now, let's hear your story."

Something caught Vo-Shay's eye. "It'll have to wait."

"Why?"

The gambler's hands were already dancing over the controls, abruptly dropping the Ray out of hyperspace. "Because we've got company...."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vo-Shay tracked the three incoming ships on the Ray's sensors.

"Who is it?"

"They haven't introduced themselves yet, but somehow I don't think it's a welcoming committee." The gambler eyed the display and frowned. "One Ghtroc freighter and two Z-95 Headhunters. Could be worse, I guess...."

"How? We're already outnumbered."

"But never outclassed." The comlink sounded its shrill call, drawing Vo-Shay's attention "It sounds as if they want to talk. That's always a good sign."

"This is Captain Yarrku of the Night Raider...." came the filtered voice.

"He sounds familiar," Nyo said.

Vo-Shay grunted. "It's that Barabel from the cantina."

"Are you sure?"

"I never forget a voice."

"What could he possibly want?"

"Only one way to find out," the gambler said, then engaged the comlink. "Is there a problem. Captain?"

"There will be unless you hand over all the credits you stole from Doune. "

"Stole? From Doune? Hah! That blubberpot Herg must be going senile.... I won that money fair and square at a sabacc game."

"Doune does not share your view of the situation. He believes you cheated him, and he has hired us to retrieve his money. If you hand it over, there will be no damage to you or your ship. Otherwise..." The Barabel's voice trailed off ominously.

"Doune is nothing but a poor loser. And as far as I'm concerned, he's going to stay that way."

"You know, I was hoping you'd say that," Yarrku said with an unfly chuckle. Then there was only static.

The two Z-95's broke off into standard flanking formation as frighteningly powerful laser bolts erupted from the Ghtroc freighter.

Vo-Shay executed a quick barrel roll and then pointed the Ray's nose into a power dive. The two bolts screamed past, cutting through the space that the ship had occupied microseconds before.

Nyo couldn't believe it. "That thing's got a pair of quad lasers!"

"So much for talking," Vo-Shay grumbled as he swung the Ray around to face an oncoming Headhunter.

"This ship does have weapons, right?" Nyo asked.

The gambler merely grinned and touched one of the control screens.

One of the pods on the Ray's belly spiraled open, revealing a large triple-barreled laser cannon. The turret swung around, locking onto the approaching Headhunter.

A thunderous volley of laser bolts tracked the Z-95 as it tried to execute an evasive turn. The blasts "walked" right up the ship's exposed starboard side, shredding the shields, and finally exploding the ship's wing.

Without the starboard stabilizers, the Headhunter began to spin out of control, harmlessly veering off into the distance.

"Does that answer your question?" the gambler asked with a smug grin.

His smile faded when one of the Night Raiders quad laser bolts slammed into the Ray's port side. The impact spun the light freighter around sharply and Vo-Shay found himself fighting to keep her steady.

The other Headhunter was closing in, with all blasters blazing away mercilessly.

Unable to evade the attack, the Ray was forced to take a considerable pounding from the Z-95's strafing run.

The ship bucked and shook under the assault, knocking the two men around in their chairs. The gambler cursed under his breath as he steadied his wounded craft.

"We just lost half our shields!" Nyo cried out in alarm.

Acting as if he didn't hear, an enraged Vo-Shay brought the Ray into a hard bootlegger's turn that sent a structural groan through the ship. He closed the distance with impossible speed. Nyo felt as if a giant invisible hand was pressing against his chest. "I didn't know freighters could move this fast."

"Most can't. This one can."

Thanks to Vo-Shay's expert piloting, the Ray mirrored every last maneuver the Headhunter executed. It was as if the two pilots were of one mind. No matter what tactic it tried, the Z-95 could not shake off the larger ship. A sustained burst of heavy blaster fire quickly turned the Headhunter into a flaming starburst.

"Gotcha!" Vo-Shay shouted.

"And I got you," came Yarrku's filtered voice over the comlink. It was followed by another bone-jarring impact as another quad laser blast found its mark.

"Shields are gone," Nyo cried out in alarm. "And the hyperdrive's been damaged."

The gambler quietly brought the Ray around to face the Night Raider. The big Ghtroc freighter hung there in space, waiting, with its big quad lasers brought to bear. The two idle ships looked like gunfighters, each one waiting for the other to draw....

Yarrku's voice broke the silence. "Your shields are gone. Another hit from my weapons and you'll be nothing but debris. Do the sensible thing and hand over the money. Before it's too late."

"So we give you the credits and you'll leave us alone?" Vo-Shay asked.

"You have my word."

He's lying.

Vo-Shay and Nyo spoke at the same time. "I know." The two men exchanged a quick look, though Nyo seemed more than a bit bewildered.

The gambler keyed the comlink. "Deal. I'll put the credit chip in a probe and launch it over."

"Minimal contact, minimal need for trust. Yes, that would be satisfactory. However, any tricks and I'll blow you to microns."

Vo-Shay shut off the comlink and reached for the controls.

"We're not really going to give it to him, are we?" asked a flustered Nyo.

The gambler grinned. "Oh, we're going to give it to him, all right."

Three of the small forward pods on the Ray slid away to reveal darkened launch tubes.

"All yours," Vo-Shay said over the comm as he punched the control panel.

A trio of proton torpedoes simultaneously screamed out of the Ray's tubes, streaking toward the Night Raider.

In response, the Ghtroc opened up with both quad lasers.

Nyo shut his eyes.

The quad laser bolts reached the Ray, and impacted... against the ship's shields.

"Nooo!" That was the final transmission from the Night Raider, before the torpedoes converged and turned the ship into a giant, blossoming fireball.

The young man slowly looked around, utterly amazed to be alive.

Vo-Shay flashed a grin.

"But... our shields were gone," Nyo said in disbelief.

"One of the miracles of Mon Cal engineering, son. Redundant shield systems. Of course, half-witted opponents don't hurt, either." The gambler took the controls and engaged the sublight engines. "Nar Shaddaa, here we come...."

"I don't have it," the dealer said. "How many other ways can I say it?"

"What do you mean you don't have it?" Nyo repeated for the fourth time.

Vo-Shay arched an eyebrow, leaning on the counter. "I think my associate is just curious as to the reason why you no longer have the lightsaber."

The chubby businessman grinned, bearing diamond white teeth. "Because I already sold it."

"But I put down a deposit so you wouldn't."

"What can I say?" the man said simply. "A better offer came along."

Nyo looked just about ready to kill the fat merchant. Vo-Shay was suddenly glad the kid was unarmed.

"Well, who did you sell it to?" the young man demanded.

"Sorry. That's privileged information."

Nyo swept a hand across the bare warehouse that served as the dealer's shop. It was currently empty except for the three of them. "There's no one else here. Maybe I can cut a deal with the buyer. I swear I won't say a word."

"It's not going to be too hard to figure out who gave you the information. " The dealer shook his head. "Can't do it. Now, if there's something else you'd be interested in..."

Nyo seemed to be on the brink of exploding at the man, but thought better of it. He spun around and stormed out of the shop. The gambler shrugged and followed him out.

"Sorry, kid," Vo-Shay said as they boarded the Ray. He squeezed Nyo's shoulder. "The galaxy can be a cruel place sometimes."

"I know," the young man said softly, "it's just that I wanted that saber so much."

"Well, you never know- was The gambler's voice abruptly trailed off as he saw the flashing light on the display.

"What is it?"

"A message..." Vo-Shay tapped the control.

A holo-recording crackled into the air, taking the shape of a certain Herglic gambler.

"Doune." The word tumbled from the gambler's lips like a curse.

"Greetings, farmboy. And to you as well, O legendary one. It seems as though the attempt to recoup my losses failed miserably. Ah, well... life can be surprising! Can it not?" The Herglic held up a long, silver haft and smiled.

Nyo's eyes had grown to the size of thermal detonators threatening to explode.

"As I'm sure you've guessed by now, it was I who purchased this elegant little weapon you so craved. And I would not be loathe to part with it-under certain circumstances."

"Come on, get to the point, you bloated bag of wind," Vo-Shay mumbled.

"What I am proposing is simple. One last hand of sabacc between myself and Vo-Shay. If the gambler wins, you can have the lightsaber. If I win, I get the source of the gambler's uncanny luck-the obsidian necklace. If you accept, meet me at the Nygann Cantina three hours from now...." The holographic image faded.

Nyo and Vo-Shay exchanged a look.

"You've done so much for me already," the young man began. "I would never ask you to do this-especially if it means you could lose your necklace."

"I won't. Lose, that is..." The gambler grinned. "Besides, I told you... I never could resist a challenge."

Doune and Vo-Shay faced off once again, this time in a private gambling room at the back of the cantina. The only other beings present were the dealer droid, Nyo and Doune's droid, Vee-Six.

"One last hand decides it all, correct?" asked the Herglic.

The gambler nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off his opponent.

The dealer droid sent five sabacc cards to each player, then obediently waited for the two men to look over the hands they'd been dealt.

"Sabacc!" With a thunderous laugh, the Herglic abruptly shoved his cards into the interference field and glowered in triumph. "Beat that?"

Nyo paled as he glanced at Vo-Shay, who was nervously twirling his pendant.

The gambler looked up from his cards and slowly inserted them into the field. First was the Idiot card. Then came the Two of Sabers. A three of any suit would give Vo-Shay an Idiot's Array.

And a winning hand.

The Herglic took in a sharp breath, his skin mottling furiously....

The gambler fingered one of his remaining cards, then slipped it into the field. For a moment, his hand covered the surface, then finally moved clear.

The Five of Staves. For a total of eight.

Vo-Shay had lost.

Nyo blinked once, then his mouth fell open. He tried to meet the gambler's eyes, but Vo-Shay had turned away as if he had found something incredibly interesting on the floor.

The Herglic roared his approval and then extended a flipper. "I believe you have something that now belongs to me...."

Vo-Shay carefully slipped the obsidian pendant from his neck and handed it over without a word.

Ecstatic, the Herglic snatched it up. "So, the unbeatable one has fallen at last. With this, I will be unstoppable." He grinned at Nyo. "Congratulations, boy... you have just witnessed the death of an old legend and the birth of a new one." Doune got to his feet and started for the door, Vee-Six trailing behind him. The Herglic paused at the door, and almost as an afterthought, tossed the lightsaber onto the table. The weapon scattered the sabacc cards. "Here! It's not as though I need it...." With a final terrible chuckle, the Herglic and his droid left.

Nyo stared first at the saber, then at Vo-Shay. "I... I don't know what to say...."

The gambler looked up, brandishing a wide smile. "Well, you could start with "thank you." was He flipped over one of the sabacc cards he hadn't played....

The Three of Sabers.

The young man was stunned. "You had the Idiot's Array! You won!" Then it hit him. "But why didn't you play it?"

"First of all, considering how badly Doune reacted to my winning his money in the first place, do you really think he would have let us just waltz out of here with the lightsaber even if I did win it fair and square? Plus, I counted at least a

half-dozen meres nursing glasses of lum on our way in here. My guess is that all they were waiting for was Doune's order."

"I see your point, I guess. But you didn't have to sacrifice your pendant!"

"Listen, kid... that particular bauble was given to me a long time ago by a tenacious old girlfriend who wanted more of a relationship than I was ready for at the time. This girl refused to give up, no matter what I said or did. The only reason I considered it lucky was because the day she gave it to me, we finally broke up. I kept the thing and discovered that when I played with it during a game, it did a wonderful job of distracting my opponents. So you see, it really has no mystical power. I make my own luck. As do we all..."

A smile crept onto Nyo's lips. "Doune's in for quite a surprise, then."

"Exactly why we should get going," Vo-Shay said, tossing him the lightsaber.

Nyo caught it easily and couldn't believe he was holding the one thing he had dreamed about for so long. He turned the haft over in his hands, caressing the smooth lines and imagining himself swinging that beautiful bright blade through a graceful arc....

Vo-Shay abruptly reached back inside the room and yanked the starstruck young man after him.

Nyo awoke to a soft, humming sound. It varied in pitch almost constantly, and for a moment, he thought some sort of insect had crawled into his head during his nap. Far away.

Then he saw the odd glow reflected on the ship's bulkhead. Quietly making his way back to the passenger compartment, Nyo peeked around the corner.

Vo-Shay stood in the Ray's lounging area, deftly swinging the bright orange energy blade through a series of amazing thrusts and parries. After a few moments, the gambler sensed he was being watched and powered down the saber. He turned to Nyo, extending the weapon handle-first to the young man. "I hope you don't mind. I just couldn't resist."

"How do you know how to do that?" Nyo demanded. Then the young man suddenly grinned. "And can you teach me?"

The gambler plopped down onto one of the lounge chairs. "I guess I still owe you my story, right?"

The young man nodded, taking the seat opposite Vo - Shay's.

"Well, the legends surrounding my disappearance were correct. The Ray was indeed caught in the Tyus cluster, and at the center of that mass of ugly black holes, time was nonexistent. Many others had been trapped there before me, though none had survived. Except for one... a Jedi Master. She helped me escape, and even taught me a little about the Force."

"That's a pretty short summary...."

"I'll save the whole story for another day," Vo-Shay said dismissively. "After all, we'll have plenty of time together when you sign on as my first mate."

"Do you mean it?"

"I never say what I don't mean, kid. Welcome aboard."

"So, you'll teach me about the Force?"

"Me? No... I'll teach you how not to lose everything to a Herglic at the sabacc table. She'll instruct you in the mysterious ways of the Force."

"This is Aryzah," Vo-Shay said by way of introduction, "the lovely Jedi Master who saved my life."

Greetings, Nyo. May the Force be with you.

"And just between the two of us, kid," Vo-Shay said with a wink, "you're gonna need it."

The Occupation of Rhamalai

The ominous black shadow enveloped her completely. She wanted to lash out against it, but she couldn't move, couldn't even breathe. Something held her shoulders in a relentless grip-

"Mother, wake up!"

The voice pulled Charis Enasteri back to reality and she struggled to open her heavy eyes. A blurred face, framed in golden-brown hair, gazed down at her as she lay in bed. Gentle hands grasped her shoulders, shaking her awake.

"Mother, I've got good news, wake up!"

"Oh. Nadra. " Charis blinked her eyes as the dream faded. Slowly her daughter's face came into focus, "What's the matter?"

"I just heard-I rushed home to tell you-"

"Nadra. " Charis grasped her daughter's hand. "Calm down. "

Nadra took a deep breath. "I heard some good news today. There's a chance you could be cured!"

Charis sighed. Her daughter would never accept the Inevitable. "I'm not going to get better, you know that. This condition comes and goes but it will only get worse with time. Nothing can change that. "

"But, Mother, Imperial ships have landed on Rhamalai! Right here in Argona!"

Charis gasped and searched her daughter's face. "When?"

"Just an hour ago. "

"But, that's good news. Mother. Don't you see? The Empire has all the technology that Rhamalai shuns. It must have advanced medical treatments as well. I just know you could be healed!"

"Absolutely not! I will not be treated by Imperials. " Charis insisted. Her daughter's look of perplexed hurt troubled her. "Nadra, listen to me. There are many things you don't understand. The Emperor's men can't be trusted-

The sudden rumble of marching feet interrupted her Nadra crossed to the window. "There are soldiers in white armor coming down the street. "

"Stormtroopers!" Charis couldn't disguise her fear.

"They're going into the houses. What are they doing?" Nadra seemed more curious than afraid.

Panic threatened but Charis tried to calm herself. "Come here, Nadra. Help me sit up before they get here, " she said.

Nadra returned to assist her. "They're coming here? Why?"

"They will search every house. They always do, " Charis replied. "We must appear... unconcerned. Why don't you sit and read to me?"

Nadra perched on the narrow chair next to the bed. She picked up the wordscript they had started the night before, but didn't open it. Seconds slogged by, dragging into minutes. Heavily booted feet sounded on the pavement. A panicked voice shouted in the distance. A child wailed.

Without warning, a heavy pounding came at the door to their small home. Both women jumped. "This planet is now under the jurisdiction of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Palpatine, " a harsh voice rang out. "Any occupants of this house, come forward at once. "

Nadra moved toward the outer room and Charis hissed after her, "Be careful. Do not anger them. "

Nadra nodded.

Charis heard her daughter step to the door and open it. "We're here. My mother is sick so please don't disturb her. "

Heavy footsteps thudded across the floor. "Where is your mother?" the same filtered voice demanded.

"In bed. She's very ill-" Nadra's answer was cut off as a tall trooper wearing a shoulder pauldron strode into the bedroom to stand over Charis. Nadra stumbled in after him another stormtrooper holding her upper arm tightly.

Their presence was overwhelming. Charis felt nauseated. "How may we assist you. Lieutenant?" she asked, straining to keep her voice under control.

"All males between the ages of sixteen and thirty-five are ordered to report to the Imperial base for immediate screening and conscription into the Emperor's service. "

"Only my daughter and I live here. " Charis managed to answer. Her heart pounded and she felt short of breath. "My husband died years ago. I have no other children. " she added.

His helmet's grim expression pinned Charis to her sheets. "Do not think to hide your men from us, " he menaced, leaning over her, if you have lied, you will suffer. "

He turned to look carefully at Nadra. "We need civilians in support positions. Report to the Civilian Service Personnel office at the garrison in the morning. You will be assigned duties. "

"But my mother is sick. " Nadra protested. "I have to care for her. "

The stormtrooper stared again at Charis. "The Emperor is benevolent, " he said in a mechanical monotone. "She will be treated at our medical facility. A transport will collect her in the morning. "

He turned to his companion. "Move on to the next house. " They strode away as abruptly as they had come.

Charis felt as though she had been struck by lightning, its swift and deadly energy leaving her a quivering mass.

Nadra returned to her bedside, bending down to hug Charis tightly. "I got my wish, but I don't think I want it anymore, " she said, her voice shaking.

Charis stroked her daughter's hair. "You understand now. The Emperor is an oppressive overlord and his stormtroopers are ruthless. Just do whatever they ask. Your father gave everything to ensure our safety. We can't throw that away carelessly. "

"What do you mean?" Nadra straightened up to look into her mother's eyes. "I thought Father was dead. "

Charis sighed deeply. "Your father was being hunted by the Emperor's agents. He left Rhamalai when you were just a year old, to protect us. " Her eyes filled with tears. "I never heard from him again. "

"Then he's still alive somewhere? We could look for him, if we could get off-planet somehow!" Nadra's eyes lit with hope.

"It's been sixteen years. He sent no word in all that time. He must be dead. "

"Maybe Director Pellias can help. "

Charis sighed. "Nadra, I've wrestled with this for years. There's no way-"

"But we have to try!"

A dull pain throbbed in Charis's head. She put a hand over her eyes. "Nadra, please. "

"I'm sorry, " Nadra murmured. She kissed Charis lightly on the forehead. "I'll bring you some tea. "

When Nadra had gone, Charis let her tears fall. The hope in Nadra's eyes wrung her heart. "Oh, please, " she whispered into the air. "If there's anyone out there who can hear me, please, please protect my daughter. "

Denel Moonrunner sat on the stone wall behind his parents' house. The sun shone warm on his shoulders, but something wasn't right. He felt a strange disturbance, as if someone was calling for help. He wanted to jump up and give aid, but to whom? He tried to locate the source of these feelings, but they dissipated quickly. He'd had these strange urges a lot lately-he just wished he knew what they meant.

"Just growing pains, adolescent yearnings. " his father had said. But Denel wondered if Lorn Moonrunner knew more than he would admit.

Suddenly another strong feeling flooded through him, this time a sense of danger. He was startled as something nudged him hard in the back, nearly pushing him off his place on the garden wall.

"Chaser, you old beggar, " Denel chuckled. He turned around to scratch the gorset between its blunt horns. "Never get enough attention, do you, boy?" The four-legged animal stamped a hoof and shook his curly head. "No, I can't take you out for a run right now. I have studies to finish. "

The tall, black beast brayed at him.

"Denel?" his mother called from the house. "Denel, come here please. " Her voice sounded strange somehow. He hopped down from the wall and headed into their home.

As he entered the sitting room, he was surprised to see four Imperial stormtroopers surrounding his mother. Artis's face was taut and frightened. "What's going on, mother?" he asked carefully. "You must go with these men, " she answered in a tiny voice. "Why?"

"No questions!" their commander barked. "You've been drafted into the Imperial Army. Come along immediately. " They encircled Denel and began pushing him toward the door.

"Wait a minute. " Denel protested. "I've been planning to attend the Academy for years. I just turned eighteen so now I can apply. Give me an hour to get some things together and I'll-"

"Silence!" the officer barked. "You will follow orders. The Empire will provide all your needs and you'll be grateful. "

"But, where are you taking me?" Denel continued as one trooper shoved him out the door with the butt of his blaster rifle. "When can I return? Can't I at least say good-bye to my parents?" He stumbled down the steps.

"Shut up and move along. " Another trooper grabbed Denel's arm and hauled him down the walk toward the front gate.

Denel could hear his mother weeping. He wrenched out of the stormtrooper's grasp and turned around. "Mother-" he began, but fell to his knees in pain as he was gun-jabbed from behind.

"You will obey my orders. " the commander growled in Denel's ear. They hauled him to his feet and out the gate.

As he was herded clown the street. Denel noticed many other men being taken from their homes. He saw his neighbor Dorn Lister, and his friend Amos Granley. Sweat trickled down Denel's spine. No one spoke. Apparently they had all learned their first lesson in obedience, just as he had.

"You will order your people to cooperate, or we will have to demonstrate our intentions more... dramatically. " General Yrros strutted across the Planetary Trade Director's office. "I'm sure your citizens would rather live peacefully than sacrifice themselves for no good reason. " He paused to read a framed award which hung on the panelled wall.

Markren Pellias gazed up from behind his desk at the Imperial general's square, haughty face. His fingernails bit into the palms of his clenched fists. "Their peace has already been ripped away by your stormtroopers. You've invaded their homes, taken their husbands, brothers, and sons. I wasn't aware the Emperor condoned such methods. "

General Yrros turned to face him. "It is not preferable, but it is necessary at this time. Their families will be adequately compen-sated. "

"Adequately compensated?" Pellias rose to his feet and stepped toward Yrros. "Do you think a few credits here and there will make up for losing a loved one?" It was all he could do to keep from planting his fist right in the middle of the general's aristocratic nose.

Yrros was not intimidated. With precise steps, he crossed the carpet, stopping with his face no more than twenty centimeters from the director's. The general's greater height forced Pellias to tip his head back to meet the dark, angry eyes.

"It is necessary at this time. " the general enunciated slowly glaring down at Pellias.

The director lowered his eyes and stepped back.

"Imperial troops are paid generously, " Yrros went on. "Their families will not suffer unduly. Everyone will be grateful for the chance to contribute to the New Order. You'll make sure of that, won't you?"

"Yes. General. " Pellias turned away to hide his bitterness. "We will cooperate."
"

"Good. Now, please, be seated and we'll discuss the terms of our presence here. " Yrros perched on the arm of an intricately carved wooden chair facing the desk. He didn't stop to appreciate its beauty and craftsmanship.

Pellias sat down heavily behind his desk, wondering how long it would remain his.

As if he could read Pellias's thoughts, General Yrros continued, "I am now in command of this system. You will be my chief liaison between the military presence and the people.

"If you remain cooperative, you will be allowed to run your government much the same as before, with one exception. " The general slapped his dark gloves into one hand as he spoke. "Every decision you make-whether holding elections, making new laws, trade and commerce agreements, even holiday celebrations-must be pre-approved before being put into action. Do you understand?"

Pellias understood all right. He and all the guild leaders would be nothing more than Imperial puppets. "I understand. "

"You'll be allowed to retain these offices. " The general looked around, not bothering to conceal a sneer. "Imperial headquarters will be at the base. "

"Of course, " the director replied with a touch of sarcasm.

"There will be some significant changes, however, especially in the area of technological improvements to this backward planet. "

"Such as?"

"The reason we are here. Agriculture. Rhamalai's rich soil is ideal for raising food crops. As soon as construction of the garrison base is complete, we will begin work on a chain of food processing plants and a central exportation complex. Rhamalai will have the glorious duty of feeding our troops. "

Pellias had no reply.

"Get word to your farmer's guild, " the general went on. "They are to send representatives to Argona immediately. Next week we begin retraining, using modern methods of food production. " The general shook his head slightly. "How this planet ever remained in such primitive condition is beyond me. "

"We don't want your improvements. " Pellias said. "Rhamalai has existed for four hundred years without technological entrapments. "

"A strange attitude to hold, considering all the benefits of technology. " Yrros peered at the director, like an entomologist examining a new species of insect.

"This planet was settled by Cherishites, " Pellias explained. "They chose to live simply, in harmony with the planet. Those beliefs are held to this day and we have laws to protect them. "

"I am well aware of your planet's history, Director, " General Yrros said. "The Cherishites and all who follow their ways are fools. You're nothing but a loose collection of blind idealists playing children's games. It's a wonder no one has taken over this planet until now. "

"For three centuries, a Jedi master who settled with the original colonists guarded this world, " Pellias answered. "He defended the planet against exploitation, and acted as a healer as well. "

"A Jedi? Living for over three hundred years?" Yrros scoffed. "There are none left in the entire galaxy. "

"He died about the time the Emperor came to power. Since then have been unprotected. "

"Well then, be glad you have something the Emperor values. Rhamalai now has the greater protection of the Empire. "

Pellias stood behind his desk. "Yes, but who's going to protect us from you?"

In two strides Yrros crossed the room, lifted his right arm and backhanded Pellias across the face. "Guard your words. Director, or you will soon become the worst kind of example for your people. "

The general stalked to the door. He turned to Pellias again "Talk to your leaders tonight and report to me in the morning. One day you will thank me for bringing this mud-hole of a planet into the present century. " He slammed the door shut behind him. "I sincerely doubt that. General, " Pellias replied.

Lorn Moonrunner sat with his wife in their kitchen. It was late at night, the light of a single taper glowing on the table before them. The town was strangely quiet since the Imperial curfew had been enacted. Lorn drummed his fingers on the table as a Rhamalian time device ticked in the background.

"Director Pellias told me there is nothing we can do. " he said at last. "Denel should be treated well enough since he's human. It's the non-human species that are forced into slavery when the Empire takes over. "

"But when can we see him?" Artis said. "Why didn't they let him leave in a normal fashion?"

Lorn took his wife's hands. "You already know the answer to that. Intimidation. Fear keeps the people under control. You've seen the procedure often enough. If Rhamalai had been a technologically advanced planet, the Imperials might have tried to woo us into the Empire with promises of power and favor But since we're undefended, they don't hide their true nature. They just takeover.

"I thought we left all that behind long ago. " Artis shook her head, then gasped as a new thought struck her. "What if they interrogate Denel? What if they find out who we are?"

"Denel doesn't know. " Lorn assured her. "How could he tell them anything? We both had our looks altered before he was born. And our identity files should be flawless for the price I paid. "

Lorn stood up to gaze out the window. Several stormtroopers were circulating through the town, enforcing the curfew. "At least things have settled down for

now. " he said. "Pellias was wise to forbid any active resistance. The Imperials believe we re com-pletely helpless. "

"But we can't just sit here and do nothing. "

Moonrunner returned to the table. "I agree. It's time to pup our emergency plan into action. "

"Are you sure?" Artis asked. "Can we get Denel out of the garrison?"

"We'll have to get word to him somehow. " He thought for a moment. "Nadra Enasteri is working there in civilian support. She's allowed in and out of the base every day. We'll need her help. And something else. "

He stood and went into their bedroom with Artis following Lorn shut the door and drew the blinds over the windows. They moved their bed aside and he knelt on the bare wooden floor.

"Hand me a bolt driver. " Artis found one in a drawer.

Lorn ran his hand carefully along the floor until he felt a tiny notch cut in one edge of a floorboard. Inserting the tool into the notch, he pried the board up. He reached into the gap and brought up a small bundle. He shook off the dirt, unwrapped the object, and blew away any remaining dust.

In his hand lay a black rectangular box about fifteen centimeters long. On one end was a dark lens, less than a centimeter in diameter. Across the front were several input keys and indicator lights. With a tiny click. Lorn turned the mechanism on. It hummed faintly as several of the lights lit up.

"It still works, " he said.

* * *

"General, this is highly irregular, " Sergeant Droman said as he hurried along behind the base commander. "It is not standard procedure for a general to address a group of new conscripts. "

"I am aware of that. Sergeant. " General Yrros replied shortly. "You'll soon learn that I originate standard procedure. "

They entered a large assembly room near the base training facilities. Ten rows of new conscripts stood at attention in their crisp, brown uniforms. Yrros strolled casually across the front of the room.

The general addressed them without preamble. "The chaos of the dying Republic was a plague throughout the Known Galaxy. The advance of that disease was arrested when Emperor Palpatine came to power, yet many malignancies remain.

"You will become the sharp instrument to lance the boils of decay and corruption. You will be the antidote to the rampant infection which yet persists.

"To do this, you must become the most disciplined force imaginable. The Empire has no use for sloppy, weak men. You will become strong. " he shouted the word at them, "and disciplined". He squeezed a gloved fist before one conscript's face. The young man flinched.

Something about this conscript seemed familiar to Yrros. "What is your name, son?" He laid a hand on the boy's shoulder, deciding to make an example of him.

The young conscript relaxed and half-smiled as he looked up into the general's face. "Denel Moonrunner, sir. "

"Wrong!" Yrros yelled. "Stand at attention! Wipe that smile off your face! And don't you ever look me in the eye, boy. " The general was satisfied to see the conscript's face go white as he stiffened his stance and stared straight ahead.

Yrros poked a hard finger against the boy's chest. "See this number here?" He poked the service number printed above the conscript's left pocket.

"Yes, sir!" the boy shouted without looking down.

"What is that number, soldier?" He poked it again.

"FR-231, sir. "

"Do you know what it means?"

"No, sir!"

General Yrros glanced back at Sergeant Droman. "Sergeant! Tell this boy what the number means. "

"Yes, sir! F stands for first, R for Rhamalai. " Sergeant Droman barked. "Two hundred thirty-one is your personal number. You are the 231st conscript in the first recruitment from Rhamalai. "

"Repeat the number, soldier. " Yrros ordered.

"FR-231, sir!" the boy shouted.

"Louder!"

"FR-231, sir!"

"I want your dear, sweet mother back in town to hear you say it, boy!"

"FR-231, sir!" the boy screamed.

"That is your name now, soldier, " Yrros poked the boy's number one last time for emphasis. "And don't you forget it. "

"No, sir; uh, yes, sir!" The boy's face was red but he didn't show any emotion otherwise. Yrros nodded.

The general continued addressing the group. "This designation identifies you as a member of the New Order, a select group of men chosen to bring direction to the aimless confusion left by the former government. It is your password into a new existence, the key to gaining respect, power, and glory! Honor it well. "

Yrros surveyed the group silently for a moment. No one moved. Satisfied, he turned to the drill instructor. "Sergeant, carry on, " he said.

* * *

Nadra scurried down a long corridor in the Imperial base. Maybe she could steal a few minutes for herself if she ran on the way back to her work station. She glanced behind her as she hurried. If anyone discovered what she was doing-

Thump! She ran headlong into something, knocked herself off balance, and sat down hard on the floor.

A tired voice above her said, "Oh, excuse me, I didn't see you- Nadra?"

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she looked up. "Denel!"

"Nadra! Are you all right? What are you doing here?" Denel reached out a hand and helped her to her feet. "You came flying clown the corridor so fast. "

"Shh, Denel! They shouldn't see us together. " Nadra grabbed his sleeve and pulled him quickly down the side corridor from while had come.

"Nadra, I was going the other way! We can't-"

Nadra clamped a hand over his mouth and dragged Denel toward a maintenance access closet. Glancing in both directions she opened the door and pulled him inside. There was just room for the two of them amidst the piping and conduits. A status readout panel's blinking lights gave the closet an eerie glow.

Before Denel could say another word, Nadra threw her arms around him. "I'm so glad to see you!" she whispered fiercely.

"Me too. " He said, yawning.

She looked up into his face. "You don't sound too enthusiastic. What's the matter?"

"Oh, sorry. " Denel stifled another yawn. "I'm exhausted. I've slept less than five hours each night since I got here. " He rubbed his eyes, then peered down, noticing her light blue uniform. "Civilian support, huh? I wonder how many people they left to run the town. "

"Denel, listen, " she said. "I need your help. "

"Sure. What's up?"

"I just got word today. I've been trying to figure out what to do. " Suddenly tears filled her eyes and clogged her voice. "My mother's scheduled to be terminated, tomorrow. "

"What!" Her news shocked Denel fully awake. "Why?"

"She was brought in for treatment. Her condition is incurable, a genetic defect, they said. " She could hardly choke out the words. "She'll only get worse and be in a lot of pain. It could drag on for years. " The tears flowed freely down her face. "They said it's better to spare her the misery and humiliation. "

"Oh. Nadra, " Denel whispered.

"She seemed to be getting better, but they said it's no use. They'll let me visit briefly tomorrow, at 0800 hours. Then she'll be 'mercifully eliminated.'" Nadra broke down, sobbing quietly.

Denel cradled her in his arms. "Shh, Nadra. There must be something we can do. " He was silent for a minute.

"Hey, listen. I have an idea. " He shook her gently and lifted her chin. "I think there's a chance, but we haven't much time. Can you get access to a data terminal?"

"Yes." She calmed herself, wiping the tears on her sleeve. "I'm being trained to use them in my work. Why?"

"Perfect. We can get your mother and me out of here at the same time. "

"But. I thought you wanted to be in the service?"

Denel sighed and looked away. "I believed the propaganda about the benevolence of the Empire. My father tried to tell me otherwise, but he would never explain why he distrusted Imperials. He once told me they record their own acts of war, then alter the evidence to place blame on the Rebels. I thought Dad was crazy, but, well, else could they get those gruesome

indoctrination vids we're forced to watch?" He shuddered. "And now this thing with your mother... I'm getting out. We'll need my father's help. "

"Your father?" Nadra shook her head. "He can't fight an entire garrison. "

"Just listen, " Denel returned. "Go to my father tonight. I'll have things in place by the time you return in the morning. Now, here's what we're going to do. "

* * *

Captain Tosh stood at attention before General Yrros's desk, waiting for the general to acknowledge his presence.

"You wished to see me. Captain?" Yrros said at last, looking up from his datascreen.

"Yes, sir, " Tosh answered. "I'm concerned about the security situation. The sensory net to monitor civilian movements has not been completed, and the current security codes have not been entered into the main computer system. Even the heavy artillery targeting programs have not been installed yet. "

"You do read your memos, don't you. Captain?" Yrros drawled.

"Yes, sir, every one. "

"Then you're aware, " the general went on, "that our top priority is to get food to our troops as soon as possible. All other tasks are secondary. "

Captain Tosh couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Secondary?

Even security? We'd be nearly defenseless if the Rhamalians chose to attack. "

General Yrros keyed in a few more commands, then waited for the computer's response. He turned back to his security officer.

"Think for a minute, Captain. This planet was settled by a fanatical group of technophobes. These people have nothing but the most primitive weapons, there are no transports or communications to monitor, they have no technical knowledge to speak of. These techno-idiot cower like frightened coneys

before us. One stormtrooper with a blaster rifle would be enough to strike terror in the hearts of the whole population. "

"Yes, sir, " the captain said, shifting from one foot to the other and back again.

"I can see you're uncomfortable without all your little toys in place. " the general scoffed. "Let me assure you, it won't be much longer. In another day or two, more technicians will be available to complete the security net. Then you may activate all the technological terrors you need to protect yourself. Until that time, just stay alert. "

"Yes, sir, " Tosh replied.

"Dismissed, Captain. " The general turned back to his data screen as the security chief exited quietly.

"Now, where was I?" Yrros muttered to himself. "Ah, yes. " A listing of the planet's citizens came up on the screen. He began to key in a request for a second list-the Empire's most wanted criminals. "Now, let's see if this planet holds any secrets. "

* * *

"Our name is not really Moonrunner, " Lorn told Nadra as they discussed Denel's plan in the Moonrunner's sitting room that night.

"We had to change our identities before we came to Rhamalai sixteen years ago, " Art is explained "We thought this planet was so remote, so undeveloped, that the Empire would never bother coming here. "

Nadra looked from one to the other "Well, who are you then?"

Lorn cleared his throat. "Perhaps it's best if you don't know everything yet. Let's just say I know a lot about the Imperial Army. General Yrros would like very much to get his hands on me, if he knew who I was. "

Nadra was speechless.

Lorn changed the subject 'You know that our family came to Rhamalai when Denel was very young. "

"Yes, " Nadra agreed.

"And you know of the Rhainalian laws which guard against the spread of any off-planet technologies travelers bring with them. If a newcomer wishes to stay on Rhamalai, he must destroy his ship, his weapons and any other devices he may have. "

Nadra nodded.

"When our family came here and decided to stay, " Lorn went on. "we were told to dismantle our ship. But we didn't. "

Nadra thought her heart had stopped. "You have a starship?" she gasped. "Where?"

"The Refugee is hidden in the Great Forest Valley. "

"That's twenty kilometers west of here. "

"Since Denel was nine years old, we've been taking trips out to the ship, and flying it occasionally. Denel's quite a good pilot, and gunner. "

"That's why I could never come along on your family outings to the Valley!"

Lorn nodded. "We also have an Artoo unit aboard. " He held up a small black box, stroking it lightly with his thumb. "This remote activates and sends commands to the droid. "

"The what?"

"The droid, " Lorn chuckled. "Droids are self-aware, intelligent machines. Artoo-Forbee is our droid's designation. He handles navigation and repairs, and can store all kinds of data, project holographic messages-"

"Holo-what?" Nadra interrupted.

Lorn sighed and sat back against the cushions. "We don't really have time to explain all this. " He thought for a minute.

"Here's what we're going to do. I've already activated Forbee. He's on his way here with a couple of... safety devices. As soon as it's dark. Artis and I will ride Chaser to the Refugee. We'll intercept Forbee and send him to meet you at the edge of town. At his top speed, he should arrive just before dawn. We will continue on to the ship and get it ready for take-off. "

"But what do I do with the... droid?" Nadra wasn't sure she liked this idea.

"Patience, " Lorn patted her shoulder. "I'll explain everything, but time is short. "

Her Imperial-issue chronometer read 0745 as Nadra approached the main gate with Forbee at her heels. "You there. " one of the two guards shouted at her. "What are you doing with that droid?"

A prickle of sweat sprang up on her forehead 'You must be behind in your droid maintenance schedules. " she replied with forced confidence. "This one obviously picked up a glitch. I found him wandering around town on my way here. Do you want me to take him to maintenance?"

Nadra held her breath as the guard examined the droid. She hoped the Imperial markings were authentic.

"Hmm. It has a standard restraining bolt. I don't have a report of a droid missing, but it's one of ours all right. " He grinned at Nadra "Unless you've been hiding an Imperial droid here for years, " he laughed. He scanned Nadra lazily with a hand-held weapons detector.

Nadra smiled grimly. "Just direct me to maintenance. " she said as the guard motioned her through the gate.

"Corridor A, level three. " He dismissed her with a wave. As she moved on. Nadra heard him complaining to his companion. "If the security sensors were activated, we wouldn't lose stray droids like that. "

As Nadra entered the base she motioned Forbee aside. She scanned the corridor. So far, all clear. "All right, let's have it. " she whispered. From the top of the droid's black, domed head, a small datacard popped out Nadra hid it in her sleeve "Give me five minutes, then come to my work station. You remember the coordinates?"

Forbee's whistling reply sounded annoyed.

"Okay. I'm sorry. " Nadra apologized "I'm not used to working with droids. Just look busy. I won't be long " She left him in the corridor.

Her supervisor was busy with another trainee when she arrived. Checking to see that no one was watching, Nadra slipped the datacard into a port on her terminal. She keyed in a command, then removed the card and hid it again.

Suddenly her screen showed nothing but gibberish. The terminal beeped and squawked every time she hit a key.

"Having a problem?" the gray-haired, grim-faced supervisor asked as she strolled over.

"Uh, yes, ma'am. " Nadra was quick to answer "It just started. Shall I call for a repair droid?"

The woman punched a few keys with no result. "Yes. And be quick about it. We have a lot of data to process. General Yrros wants the last of these census records in the system today. "

Nadra faked a call to maintenance, then sat back to wait. Two minutes later. Forbee appeared. He rolled up to her terminal and extended his coupling link to the interface jack. As Forbee clicked and hummed busily, Nadra hovered over the screen, blocking it from view. She saw Denel's personnel file appear. In the blink of an eye, Denel became a med-tech assigned to the infirmary.

Nadra slipped the datacard back into Forbee as he worked. She glanced at her chronometer. "It's time for me to visit my mother. " she reminded the supervisor.

"Don't take all morning. You're expected back here by 0830. You weren't given that chronometer on your wrist just for looks, you know. "

"Yes. Ma'am. "

"I swear, training you Rhamalians to keep a schedule is impossible... " Her shrill voice drifted off as she stalked away.

Forbee continued working. Nadra gave him a quick pat as she passed.

Denel arrived at the medical unit just minutes before 0800. The med-tech on duty was completing her log entries at the central console before the shift change. She glanced up, a stern look on her round face, as Denel approached. Denel hoped he was wearing the stolen uniform correctly.

"Ah, Tech FR-231. You're a few minutes early. Promptness aids advancement. "

"Yes, ma'am. " answered Denel.

She punched up the duty roster on the screen. "Your first assignment is to take patient 89B11 to the termination room. You know where that is?"

"Yes, ma'am. Patient 89B11 to the termination room. Is the room prepped for use?" Denel hoped he sounded knowledgeable.

"Everything's ready. The patient has been tranquilized. You know the procedure?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've done it before. " Denel's heart pounded. If she liked him any detailed questions...

"Very good. " she replied. "The patient's daughter is to be allowed a short visit before termination. Don't let her prolong the parting. It's only more painful for both of them that way. " She went back to her log entries as Denel breathed a sigh of relief.

Entering Charis's room, he saw that Nadra was already there. She was talking quietly to her mother, explaining what they were about to do.

"Do you think it will work?" Charis worried. "I don't see how we can get away from here. There are so many stormtroopers. "

"We can't out-fight them, but we can out-think them, " Denel answered. "The Imperials don't consider us a threat. Security is very relaxed right now. Just follow the plan and we'll be fine. "

He glanced at Nadra. "It's time. Let's go. " He lifted Charis and placed her on a repulsorlift stretcher. "Come on. Nadra. You take one side. I'll take the other. " They slowly guided the stretcher out the door and down the hall toward the duty station.

When they rounded the corner. Denel gulped nervously. "Oh, no, " he whispered. "The station tech from the night shift is still there. " He listened for a moment. "She's giving a report to the incoming tech. I hope she hasn't mentioned Charis's termination yet. " They slowed their steps as they approached.

The night tech noticed them. "Oh, yes. " she began, speaking to the young man on day shift. "This is patient 891311. She is scheduled for-"

An intermittent buzzing interrupted her as an indicator light began to flash on the station's status console.

"Medical emergency in hangar bay four. " the night-duty tech explained. "Just get the rest of the report from the logs. " she said as she hurried away.

Nadra and Denel looked at each other. "Forbee?" Nadra mouthed the word noiselessly. Denel shrugged.

The day-duty tech looked over the small group carefully. "Where are you taking this woman?" he asked.

"Patient 89B11 is scheduled for release today. " Denel answered guardedly. "My orders are to bring these two to the surface vehicle bay and escort them home in a landspeeder. "

The young man gazed into Charis's face. "She doesn't look we enough to go home. Let me confirm that. " He punched a few keys, as Denel held his breath. "Her file won't come up. " he muttered trying the procedure again.

"Come on. Forbee, " Nadra whispered.

The station tech grunted. "Here it is now. " He scanned Charis's file quickly. "You're cleared for release, ma'am. I hope you make a quick recovery at home. "

"Thank you, " Charis replied as Denel and Nadra began moving her down the corridor again.

When they arrived at the vehicle bay, Denel stopped just outside the entry. "We almost lost the game back there. We have to convince them that you're nearly well. Can you get up and walk?" he asked.

"I think so, " Charis answered.

"Try to look stronger, " Denel urged. "Can you make it across the bay to the speeders?"

"She's too weak, Denel-" Nadra said.

"No, it's all right, Nadra. " Charis answered. "I can do it. Take my arm. " Nadra helped her mother to her feet, as Denel stashed the stretcher in a supply closet.

They made it half-way across the cavernous vehicle bay before they were stopped. "Where are you going?" the sergeant in charge growled as he stalked up to them.

"I have orders to take these two home in a landspeeder, sir, " Denel replied.

"Confirmed. " the man said, punching the information into his datapad.

"Speeder A23 is available. " The sergeant pointed to the far side of the bay.

"Uh. I thought we could just take this one, " Denel nodded his head toward a speeder no more than four meters in front of them. "It's much closer. "

"You can take A23, " the man insisted.

"But, this one's available and it's closer. " Denel felt a sense of panic. If his carefully laid plans were upset now...

The supervisor towered over Denel. "I said-"

"Ohhh. " Charis groaned as she fainted away to the floor.

"Mother! Mother!" Nadra knelt over her.

"What's the matter with her?" The sergeant shrank away from Charis.

"Nothing!" Denel snapped at him. "She's just barely recovered from an illness and needs to get home to rest. " He glared at the man.

"All right Take the closer speeder, " the man relented, tossing a key card to Denel. "Just get her out of my area. " He grimaced at Charis and stalked away.

Denel bent over Charis. To his surprise she opened her eyes and whispered brightly. "How's my acting?"

It was all Denel could do to stifle a laugh. "Come on, let's go." He carried Charis the rest of the way to the landspeeder and placed her carefully in the back seat. He sat down at the controls with Nadra next to him.

* * *

General Yrros scanned his datascreen, deep in thought. He hoped checking the backgrounds of Rhamalian citizens would reveal a few criminals wanted by the Empire. So far, his hunch had not panned out. He decided to try the next person on the list before giving up. He tapped a few keys.

On his screen flashed a likeness of Lorn Moonrunner. Yrros read over the man's history. Nothing out of the ordinary here. But something nagged at him. The name sounded familiar. Ah, that was it. That new conscript he had used as an example the other day. His name was Moonrunner. He read the screen again. Yes, Denel Moonrunner is the son.

Yrros keyed in the conscript's file. Denel's picture came up next to that of his father. Again the general was struck with a sense of familiarity as he looked at Denel's face. Odd, he thought, the son looks nothing like the father, but looks like someone I've seen before.

Suddenly he knew. He punched in another command Denel's likeness disappeared and Lorn's enlarged. Yrros tapped a few more keys. On the screen, Lorn Moonrunner's beard disappeared, his hair turned several shades darker, and his face narrowed considerably. A message flashed at the bottom of the screen

"Identity match confirmed. " Yrros read aloud. "Major Corvus Langlier, " he chuckled contentedly. "I've been looking for you for a long time. "

He thought for a moment, then flipped a switch on his intercom. "Major Vedder. "

"Yes, sir, " the voice came over the speaker.

"Locate Conscript FR-231. I want him brought to my office immediately. "

"Yes, sir, " came the reply "Getting his location now, sir" The major was silent for a moment. "Uh. General Yrros?"

"Problem, Major?"

"Conscript FR-231 is on assignment, sir. "

"On assignment?" Yrros questioned. "Major, fresh conscripts don't get assigned duties. "

"Yes, sir, but the roster shows he's on med-tech duty. Transporting a newly released patient-"

"What!" The general jumped to his feet, knocking his chair backward. "Major, locate that man immediately! Do not let him off the base. Repeat, do not let him escape!"

* * *

Nadra breathed a sigh of relief as they cleared the gate. They were on their way. She turned to grin at her mother, but the smile died abruptly.

"Denel!" she shrieked. "Stormtroopers are running toward the gates!"

Just then the two guards at the gate opened fire.

"Get down!" yelled Denel as red laser bolts zipped past.

Several bolts hit their vehicle's engine compartment velocity abruptly dropped.

Denel pulled the speeder behind a stand of large trees about thirty meters beyond the gate. "Here. You drive. " He scrambled out while pulling Nadra into the driver's seat.

"But, I don't know how!"

"Don't argue. Hit the accelerator with your foot, steer with this. " He placed her hands on the steering mechanism. "Take your mother and get out of here. I'll cover you. " He pulled two blaster rifles from under the passenger seat.

"How did those get-?"

"No time to explain. " Denel shoved a small cylinder into her hand. "Here's a comlink. Call the Refugee, they'll pick you up " He showed her how to switch it on and gave her a hard kiss "Now, go!"

"But, Denel!"

"Go!" He shouted over his shoulder as he began to return fire holding the stormtroopers back at the gate.

Nadra turned, hit the accelerator, and fled.

* * *

"They're powering up the big guns! We don't have much time!" Artis Moonrunner shouted to her husband from the co-pilot's seat of the Refugee as she listened in on General Yrros's command frequency.

"Better contact Denel now, before we get in visual range. " Lorn concentrated on flying the modified yacht. The Refugee had never been tested in battle, and it had been years since he'd been in a fight.

Artis switched frequencies. "Denel? Son, can you hear me?"

* * *

The landspeeder limped along at half speed as Nadra entered the town. She zigzagged through a maze of streets and alleys, attempting to throw off any pursuit. She sped to the far edge of town before pulling into an abandoned stable. She jumped out and shut the huge door behind them.

All at once the little device in her hand squealed. Nadra twisted its two halves until the squealing stopped.

"Hello?" she spoke into one end of it. "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

"Nadra! Is that you? Where's Denel?"

Nadra was startled to hear Artis Moonrunner. "Denel's trapped in a stand of trees, just outside the garrison gate. " she blurted into the small cylinder. "You have to rescue him!"

"But where are you, dear? Describe your location. "

Artis's concern touched her, but Nadra cared more about saving Denel right now. "Just go get Denel. Mother and I are safe for now. " She turned off the comlink to prevent any further argument.

* * *

"She switched us off!" Artis breathed, incredulous. "I can't locate her without a signal!"

"I guess we'll have to pick up Denel first. " Lorn replied. "How long before the base turbolasers are ready to fire?" The Refugee skimmed over the last of the trees and came in low over the town. He could see blaster bolts flying between the garrison gate and a stand of trees nearby. Denel must still be alive.

Artis pressed the headset tightly against her ear, listening to General Yrros scream his commands. "Another two minutes until they're fully powered up. " She listened a bit longer. "They've spotted us! They're scrambling the fighters!"

"I hope Forbee can complete his mission. " Lorn muttered. "We won't hold out long against a squadron of TIE fighters. "

He dove the Refugee low over the gates, flattening the stormtroopers against the ground. "I'm going to put her down right between Denel and that gate. " Lorn barked. "You get ready to open the hatch while I keep them busy with the laser cannon. " As the Refugee turned to land, Lorn opened fire with everything the ship had. He didn't even try to aim. Keeping those troops down was all that mattered. If only he could hold off their growing numbers.

* * *

When General Yrros entered the hangar deck, he noted that three TIE fighters were already being lifted to the flight deck at the top of the garrison. "Get those lifts moving faster, " he shouted the deck officer. "We need those fighters in the air, now!"

The three lifts disappeared into the ceiling of the hangar deck where the fighters would be readied for takeoff. The general strode into the flight control center. "Are the tractor beams set for launch sequence?" he growled at the captain seated there.

"Yes, sir, " the officer answered. "The pilots are powering up now. Ready for takeoff. "

"Launch fighters. " General Yrros watched three blips appear on the screen as the TIE fighters took off. The lifts began to descend for another load. He walked to the doorway of the control station. "Hurry it up there!" he shouted at the troops directing small tractor beams to move the fighters along the ceiling tracks to the lifts.

Just then, something bumped against his left leg. Yrros looked down. "What's this R2 unit doing here?" He turned to a trooper seated nearby. "Corporal. Take this droid down to maintenance. It's obviously malfunctioning. "

"Yes, sir. " The corporal examined the droid. "R2-4B, follow me. " The little droid didn't respond. It bumped against the general again.

"It's got a restraining bolt. Go get a controller. " General Yrros snapped at him. He watched as three more fighters were lifted to the flight deck.

The corporal returned quickly with the controller in hand. He aimed it at the droid's restraining bolt and pushed the power switch. But, instead of

deactivating the droid, a small red indicator light on the restraining bolt began blinking rapidly.

"What's this?" The general bent down to examine it more closely. "This isn't a standard restraining bolt. It's... it's a detonator!"

* * *

Denel saw the Refugee sweeping the gates with laser fire. Her hatch yawned open before the ship fully landed. He scrambled to his feet and ran up the ramp, leaving the blaster rifles behind.

They were in the air in seconds and Denel made his way up to the cockpit. "Just in time, Dad. " he said, panting. "A couple of hoverscouts were leaving the vehicle bay. "

"I saw them, " his father said as they flew back toward town.

"We've got to locate Nadra. " Denel added. "Can you get her on the comlink?"

"I'll try." His mother put on the comm headset again.

At that moment, three TIE fighters blasted into their airspace, shaking the ship from side to side.

"Shields up!" Lorn shouted. "Deuel, take the laser, cannon

Denel hurried to the aft gun turret. He adjusted the ship's intercom headset over his ears, and began tracking one fighter in the gun's sights "Here goes!" he shouted. Blinding laser bolts hit the fighter amidships. The barrage blew the TIE out of the sky, but in the wake of the explosion came more fighters.

"Three more. Dad!" Denel shouted.

In the cockpit an indicator light came to life on the control panel. "Forbee's been activated!" Lorn hollered. He flipped the ship on its side and did a sharp turn back toward the base. "Timing's going to be close for this. " He flew low over top of the garrison, the TIE fighters hot on their drive trails. The base turbolasers were tacking the Refugee, but with the fighters so close, they couldn't risk a shot. The ship passed over the base unharmed.

Suddenly a geyser of flame and black smoke erupted into the air disintegrating the top levels of the garrison base. One TIE fighter was caught in the explosion and obliterated.

Lorn struggled to keep control of the ship as the shock wave hit. "Forbee did it!" Denel hollered through the intercom.

Lorn tried to throw the remaining TIE fighters off, but they could maneuver faster than the Refugee. He wondered how long his shield modifications would hold out.

Artis struggled with the comlink. "Nadra! Come in, Nadra. If can hear me, please respond!"

* * *

From the doorway of the stable, Nadra pointed the landspeeder in the direction of the Imperial base. "Stand back, Mother. I'm going to let it go. " She set the controls on what she hoped was autopilot, punched the initiator and hopped out. The two watched as it flew in a straight line for several seconds, then crashed into an abandoned warehouse, exploding in a huge fireball. "I hope that convinces the Imperials not to look for us, " Nadra muttered.

As she switched on the comlink again, Nadra heard the sounds of battle over the tiny speaker. Suddenly a heavy blast rocked the old barn from side to side, spilling dust on their heads. "Oh, no!" Nadra moaned.

Artis's desperate voice, came on the heels of the blast "Nadra, can you hear me?"

Hope shot through Nadra's veins. "We hear you. Refugee. We're safe for now. "

All at once. Denei's voice broke in. "Nadra, give us your location. We'll try to pick you up!"

"Denel, you have to forget about us, " she said firmly "It's you and your family the Empire wants. " Nadra's eyes filled with tears. "Just leave. Get out of here!"

There was no response for a few seconds, but Nadra could hear the ship's guns blasting away at the Imperial fighters. The stable rattled and shook as the Refugee flew directly overhead, with the TIE fighters in close pursuit.

"Nadra, I'm not going to leave you. Give us a minute to locate your signal. " She could hear the desperation in Denel's voice.

"We'll be all right. I know a place to hide. " she responded. "Leave us and get yourselves to safety. "

"Nadra, please!"

"Don't argue with me, Denel, " she insisted, squeezing the comlink tightly. "There's no time. I won't tell you where we are. Just go!"

"Nadra. " Denel's voice squeaked with emotion. "Take Chaser, and anything else you need. It's all yours. "

"Take care of yourself and your family. " Nadra wiped the tears running down her cheeks.

"I'll come back. Nadra. I'll come back when I can-"

Nadra switched off the comlink and dropped it to the dirt floor. With one swift stomp she smashed it under her heel.

The two women stared at each other for a minute. "Let's go, Mother. "

* * *

Denel threw himself back against the gunner's seat in the aft turret. All his frustrations boiled to the surface. He screamed a fierce battle-cry as he caught another TIE fighter in his sights and blasted it. He succeeded in blowing away its port solar array, sending it spinning out of control.

The Refugee took a direct hit. "We can't make the jump to light speed in time!" shouted Artis. "They'll have our shields down before we can get away!"

"I've got one more trick up my sleeve, " Lorn yelled back. "You take the ship. I need the comm system for this. " Artis took over the controls as Lorn frantically slapped switches. "If I can just-"

Another blast pounded the ship.

"Shields are going down!" Artis hollered.

Lorn hammered out another signal. Suddenly the sound of blazing laser cannons ceased. Only the scream of the engines could be heard.

"Dad! The cannon won't fire!" Denel yelled through the intercom.

"It's all right, son, " Lorn answered. "They can't fire back at us either. " He resumed control of the ship. "The nav computer has the coordinates. Let's get out of here. Ready for hyperspace?" Lorn eased the hyperdrive controls forward, and the Refugee disappeared in a flash of light.

As they made their way slowly from Argona. Nadra saw four dark specks rising swiftly into the sky. When they were almost too small to see, the lead speck flashed and was gone. The defeated TIE fighters headed back toward base. "They got away. Mother, " she breathed shakily. "I can feel it. They got away. "

"How'd you do that?" Denel asked as he entered the cockpit.

His father laughed and tapped his forehead. "A little program I was developing years ago, using comm signals as a remote guidance system for TIE fighters. "

Lorn rolled his shoulders and stretched to relieve the tension. "Took the program with me when I left the Empire. Someone was wise enough to delete the recognition sub-routine from the core memory to the fighters' controls, but nobody knew I programmed a sequence to deactivate the weapons systems. Pretty effective. " Lorn grinned at his family.

"Too bad we can't use it again, " Denel said. "They'll figure out what happened in no time. "

"Right, " Lorn agreed. "I'm surprised they're still using the same firing command codes. "

"And since the Refugee's weapons are Imperial issue, they shut down too. "

"Right again son. " They were silent for a few moments.

"Dad?"

"Yes. Denel. "

"We will come back, when we can. Won't we?"

Lorn turned to look at him. "We'll do everything we can, son. I promise. "

* * *

Charis Enasteri looked out the cottage window, across the yard to the paddock. She smiled as she watched Nadra feed handfuls of sweet grass to the black gorset. After her short experience under the Imperials. Nadra had shown signs of strength and insight. She's going to be like her father after all. Charis thought.

She pondered that fact as she observed her daughter. Somehow Nadra had known this abandoned cottage, only two days' journey from Argona, was a place the Imperials would never look (or them The past weeks had been so peaceful. Charis felt she could finally relax. Her frightening dreams had stopped. Her health had improved, though she knew it was only temporary. They were happy here and Charis felt a return of hope. Perhaps some day Nadra would find her father.

"Neth. " she whispered into the air. "your daughter needs you. "

The Breath of Gelgelaar

The young Glarsaur stood on its hind legs at the base of a maugesh tree, its belly brushing up against the knotty trunk, its dark eyes trained on the large, plump reeho overhead. The bird was a precious bit of sunlight come to life -- an orange and yellow splash amidst the never-ending green of the swamp planet Gelgelaar.

The reeho was oblivious to the young Glarsaur; it was watching the two dozen adults in the clearing a few meters away. Nearly the size of men, the Glarsaurs resembled common curly-tailed lizards, with human-like front limbs that ended in formidable claws. They were covered from their spiky pates to their webbed toes with dull green scales that rendered them essentially invisible in the foliage. Their undersides provided the only contrast -- segmented plates, smooth and shiny and the shade of wet earth.

The Glarsaurs were arguing about the Sullustans living in the nearby farming settlement. They were hissing about where to lay their traps and what to use as bait to lure the wide-eyed men into the embrace of the trees.

To the young Glarsaur intent on the orange bird, the discussion seemed meaningless. What did it matter what bait was used -- fat monkeys, iquazards, crelnuts -- food was food, with the exception of the beautiful reeho. The Glarsaur began to climb. Just under the bird's eyes were feathers as red as one of the planet's rare sunsets. Its beak was black as night, like its eyes, and its feet were gray, the color of the clouds that almost perpetually shielded the swamp world. The young Glarsaur decided to pluck the bird before eating it, keeping some of the striking feathers to affix to a spear.

"Kel!" the largest Glarsaur in the clearing bellowed. "Come down from the tree. Listen to our plan!"

The loud words startled the reeho and it twisted its head about just in time to see the looming claw of the young Glarsaur. The bird screeched shrilly and dove from the branch, arcing well above the heads of the plotting reptile-men and over the pile of spears waiting to be used against the Sullustan mold farmers.

Faster, T'laerean mentally urged the reeho. Hurry. Fly faster.

The bird had to get back to the Sullustan settlement quickly, where T'laerean could use his newly-learned Force skills to separate his senses from the reeho's. His mind no longer divided, his senses all in one place, he could warn everyone about the Glarsaurs' plans. All the Sullustans would be safe. And he would be a hero.

Faster, he coaxed the reeho. From a small secret place he'd reserved for himself in the bird's mind, T'laerean watched the leaves and branches blur before the racing reeho. He felt the damp, humid air rush about bright orange feathers, heard the rapid thrum of the reeho's heart, and took in the rich scents of the world. *Fly much faster.*

The Sullustan hadn't taken over the reeho, wasn't so much controlling it or forcing it to do his bidding as he was persuading it -- entreating it to fly this way and help him. Through the Force he had joined his mind with the bird's, mentally hitchhiked along in a grand experiment, so he could see through its eyes and ears. It had been a game at first, a simple practice session, a chance to test his growing awareness of the Force, the *Breath of Gelgellar*, the Wise Man of Kooroo called it. But the game ended when T'laerean had spotted the Glarsaurs and eavesdropped on their malicious plans. The Wise Man would be so proud of him -- attempting a feat to meld with a reeho! And his fellow Sullustans, well, they would honor him, shower him with praise for saving them from the Glarsaurs.

T'laerean wasn't yet so skilled in the Force that he could release the meld with the reeho from this distance, from any distance. He needed to be in physical contact with the bird -- or thought he did, which meant indeed he must be in contact for a separation to succeed. However, someday soon he would be so skilled -- like his mentor. Soon he would be a master of the Force, able to join his senses with creatures at the edge of his vision, beyond his vision, and perhaps with the very plants that grew in profusion on the swamp world. Soon he would be able to let his mind wander around the Shrine of Kooroo, where he could spy on the pilgrims; drift toward the Great Shore Marshes, where the giant sea beasts dwelled; and then roam across all of Gelgellar.

Faster. That's it. Time for rest later.

He urged the reeho to angle its course upward until it cleared the top of the jungle canopy, to fly past the edge of the climax trees. Below, the steamy marsh plains stretched out. At the edge of the bird's vision the farming settlement came into view, with its stark and sterile interconnected metallic box-like buildings that seemed so out of place in the swampy wilderness.

T'laerean, like all the Sullustans in the settlement, knew the Glarsaurs were warlike, and the only sentient species -- if they could be called that -- native to Gelgelar. But he also knew the creatures weren't all that plentiful and that they usually kept to themselves. Until now, the reptile-men had been striking only when farmers took their vohis mold crops to the planet's spaceport, and didn't take enough guards or blasters with them for protection. Lately the farmers had been toting a good number of blaster carbines along, sizeable weapons that seemed enough of a threat to keep the reptile-men at a distance. But if the Glarsaurs were actually going to lure the Sullustans into the jungle, blasters would be next to useless. How could you shoot something you couldn't see, something invisible because it was the color of the ferns and bushes?

You're far beyond the Glarsaurs. They can't hurt you. But you must keep going so I can warn the people.

Why the reptile-men were so intolerant -- hateful -- of the Sullustans, and of the humans, Quarren, Twi'leks, and various other species who had settled the planet -- was unknown. The people posed no threat to the Glarsaurs, hadn't taken land from them, and had even tried to befriend them. But all attempts to establish peaceful relations had failed -- though there were rumors that some of the creatures cooperated from time to time with the world's criminal elements. And why the reptile-men were plotting to lure Sullustans into the jungle to slay them was a mystery to T'laerean. Glarsaurs didn't eat Sullustans. Or did they?

See the Krevk Settlement fence? The glittery silver net around the buildings? We're close now. Faster.

There wasn't much known about the reptile creatures -- other than that they were decidedly unfriendly. They moved so easily through Gelgelar's swamps, and the shvash gas that habitually and unpredictably erupted from the sodden ground never bothered them. The Glarsaurs didn't need to wear breath masks like the Sullustan mold farmers did. But neither did the reeho. The bird was used to breathing the noxious gas.

Through the reeho's eyes T'laerean spied a group of Sullustans a few hundred meters outside the fence. They were searching. through the tall grasses -- sensor packs trained on the ground, repulsorlift sleds filled with mold hovering

along behind them. Looking for the last of the mold patches to harvest this season, no doubt, he thought. The farmers were not yet near enough to the trees to be threatened by the Glarsaurs. But T'laerean knew if they continued along this course, they soon would come close enough and might be lured in by the promise of tasty food. Crelnuts were hard to resist compared to the simple bland fare of the settlement. Only Gelgellar Free Port offered native Sullustan cuisine.

The reeho banked toward the west, away from the Sullustans. *No! T'laerean's mind gently scolded. The mold farmers will not hurt you. Fly past them, to the settlement. The shiny buildings. Toward the glittery net.* His mental words were soothing, powered by the Force, and were enough to relax the reeho. It banked toward the east, past the farmers, entranced by the voice coming from a secret place in its mind. *That's it, T'laerean communicated. Now, toward the buildings, my orange friend.*

The young Sullustan felt the energy of the Force teasing his mind even as he talked to the reeho, felt the near-palpable and indescribable energy that permeated Gelgellar and everything else in the universe. He felt the Force control him, at the same time he was controlling it, and he felt its tendrils wrap around his consciousness. He worked with it, channeling it into another suggestion -- as the Wise Man had taught him. He urged the reeho to pull its wings in closer to his body, to dive. Practically skimming the tall green grass of the swampy plains now, the sun-colored reeho beat its wings even faster, carrying T'laerean's senses across a brook swollen by the recent heavy rains, closer to the settlement, then over the simple chain wall dotted with sensor units.

You are doing well, sun-reeho. I will reward you with seeds for your cooperation.

The Wise Man would arrive in the settlement next week, T'laerean knew, and would quickly learn of his student's accomplishments -- his most promising student's grand accomplishments. *Perhaps the Wise Man will spend more time teaching me more powerful Force !'skills,* he thought.

The reeho banked over three young Sullustan women who were just inside the fence. They were playing a game of Yastesh with a group of chattering

children. Toward the center of the settlement, a circle of old farmers sat beneath an overhang, their words too soft for the bird to hear. *Old tales*, T'laerean mused. *My news will give them a grand new story to tell.*

He formed another suggestion, and inwardly smiled as the bird darted toward a small building at the far end of the settlement --T'laerean's home, a hero's home. The Sullustan's body waited inside.

As the reeho sped toward an open window, two small girls, barely four or five, darted out from the shadows, laughing and tugging on each other's ears, their wide faces flushed from play. The tallest child spotted the reeho and oohed and ahed, stood on her toes and wagged her hands.

"Pretty reeho! Here pretty, pretty reeho!" she called, her high voice muffled slightly by the breath mask. Most parents made their children wear the masks outside -- just in case a shvash gas cloud erupted in the vicinity. "Here pretty reeho! Come play with us!"

Ha! The young Glarsaur came much closer to catching the bird, T'laerean mused from his secret place. He had to admit the reeho must indeed look inviting; it had captured his attention when he was looking about for a creature to meld his senses with. Slipping above the heads of the children, the reeho flew through the open window of T'laerean's home and lit on the metal floor. As the bird's eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, it hopped toward the bed, its feet clicking against the metal tiles.

On the bed, T'laerean coaxed the reeho. *Fly on the bed. Touch the Sullustan. The man there who looks to be sleeping. Then I will let you be, no more voices in your head. You can fly back to the jungle.* The bird moved closer, pausing only for a moment to pick up a small bit of crust T'laerean had dropped this morning. *Soon I will not need physical contact to make this work*, T'laerean thought. *Soon I will be strong enough in the Force that...*

"Pretty, pretty reeho!" The tallest child had entered through T'laerean's unlocked door and ran toward the bird, her arms outstretched.

On the bed! T'laerean's mind screamed. *Hurry!*

The reeho cast its head about this way and that, instantly frightened and looking between the prone form of the Sullustan and the charging girl. T'laerean could tell it considered the children every bit as much of a threat as the Glarsaurs.

On the bed! On the ...no!

A piercing screech exploded from the reeho's throat, and T'laerean watched from his secret place in the back of the bird's mind as a basket was dropped over it. The other child must have climbed in through the window, used T'laerean's own basket to catch the reeho. The wicker was thick, but woven just loose enough in a few places so the terrified reeho could look out. Its small heart hammered wildly, sounding like rolling thunder to T'laerean.

"Oh, pretty reeho!" the tallest girl gushed with delight. "What a fine pet I have now."

"My pet, too, Raenyn," the other child said. "I caught him." She dropped to the floor and peered between a tiny gap in the weave. "My pet. I will call him Sunshine!"

Pet, T'laerean fumed. I am not a pet, I am a student of the Force, a student of the Wise Man of Kooroo. I am... The pounding of the bird's heart made it difficult for the Sullustan to think. *Calm*, he urged the bird. *Relax*. But the pounding continued, and a raucous mix of sounds came out of the reeho's beak -- irritating screeches and shrill screams.

Let the reeho out of here! T'laerean's mind cried. *Now what is this?*

The reeho had to hop as a piece of leng bark was pushed under the basket, creating a bottom to the prison. Then the bird and T'laerean felt the bark and the basket rising. The children were carrying the basket outside.

"Momma," the youngest called. "Look what we caught. A pretty pet named Sunshine!"

The basket was toted toward a Sullustan woman who was muddled from the mold fields. The reeho peered out at her, its heart slowing only because its fear had exhausted it. T'laerean instantly recognized her. She was one of the

settlement council members, someone who should be warned about the Glarsaurs' ambush.

"Oh, children. The bird cannot be a pet," the woman said.

T'laerean breathed a sigh of relief. She would release the reeho, he could coax the bird to land on him, and he would use the Force to free his senses. He could warn her about the Glarsaurs and then....

"The bird can't be a pet when fresh treats like this are so hard to find outside the port. This will be a special meal for your father. I'll make reeho stew."

Dinner!

The link with T'laerean allowed the bird to grasp the woman's words. And despite its exhaustion, the bird started clacking and screeching louder, as if the threat of death injected life into it. It hopped on the bark and made shrill, piercing noises -- like a Thull whistle.

You can't kill me, T'laerean fumed. You know me! I am T'laerean, the hero. T'laerean, master of the Force! If you eat this you eat this bird, why... T'laerean panicked. He didn't know what would happen if the bird died. Would his senses return to his body -- in which case his problem would be solved though at the expense of the reeho. Or would consciousness drift away leaving his body a mindless shell? Would he die as the bird died? He had never practiced this Force ability before, only watched the Wise Man do something similar to it. He had never asked the Wise Man the possible outcomes, nor listened none too-closely as the the Wise Man explained exactly how everything worked. T'laerean had been interested only in the opportunity to merge his senses with something else.

The bird continued to screech, and T'laerean felt his fear matching its, his resolve melting like butter left on the table too long. *If you kill this reeho, it will be like eating one of your own kind! And maybe you'll have no one to warn you about the Glarsaurs. Maybe all the mold farmers will die! You could be sealing the fate of the entire settlement in the quest for one tasty meal!*

As the reeho was carried across the settlement and into the woman's home, he tried to channel his thoughts through the Force to quiet the creature, to get

himself to relax so he could think more clearly. Panic begets disaster, the Wise Man once told him. T'laerean wished he had paid more attention to that lecture and the meditating techniques the old human showed him.

We will be free, he told the bird. *Do not worry. Do not panic. The Force is my ally and won't let us die.* He hoped. *We will escape to my home at the first chance, and then you will land upon my belly. I will release you, and as my senses return to my body you can return to the jungle-never to see this settlement again.* He pictured trees and the sky, and for an instant the bird's heart slowed and its spirit lifted.

But then the basket was deposited on a gleaming metal counter and the smells of spices filled the air. Through a gap in the wicker, the reeho saw more metal objects it couldn't put a name to or fathom what they were for. But T'laerean knew. They were pots and pans.

They were in the kitchen, and the woman was heating a bowl, pouring levsh oil into it! His own fears resurfaced tenfold, and the bird's heart raced again.

"There isn't enough of him to share with everyone" the woman told the little girls. "But it is your father's birthday soon. And he so loves reeho. We'll tell everyone how you caught this bird -- both of you -- as a present for your father. People will be proud of you. And your father will be so pleased."

"Can we keep the feathers?" the smallest asked.

"Of course."

"But Mama," the taller child, the one called Raenyn, wailed. "I want the reeho - as a pet. Please."

"No" The woman's voice was stern now, tinged with parental authority. "The next time we take a mold harvest into the port, next week maybe, we'll find you a pet. Something you can cuddle. A wilwog, perhaps, a trained one that doesn't shed and won't soil the floor. Now go out and play. And put your breath masks back on." She reached for a knife.

What can I do? I must do something. If she kills the reeho, the mold farmers might die. I might die, too. The reeho screeched again, and this time T'laerean didn't try to hush it. He was trying to shut out the reeho's heartbeats,

concentrating on the woman, on the Force, wondering if perhaps he could influence her. The Wise Man could do it, T'laerean knew, persuade people to look the other way, to change their minds. If only he could change the woman's mind.

Let us go. He stretched the thought outward, like it was a leaf blowing on the breeze, blowing toward the woman. *Look at us! Let us go!* Maybe if she looked closely at the reeho, saw how truly beautiful the bird was, she would not be able to kill it.

She started humming an old Sullustan tune, adjusted the heat pad beneath the pan, then left the room. T'laerean urged the bird to look through another gap so he could see where she went. This time, however, the bird ignored him and began pacing about the basket walls, nipping in frustration at the wicker.

Look out a gap! I want to see!

The reeho thrust the persistent voice farther to the back of its brain, far into the secret place, and clacked its beak open and shut over a strand of wicker. T'laerean felt the dryness of the strand, the sourness against the bird's black tongue, the uncomfortable roughness. The bird persevered while T'laerean floated, fuming in that secret place, and within moments it had created a hole large enough to poke its head out. The reeho tried to force the rest of its body through the opening, then finally gave up and resumed chewing on the wicker.

Good friend, T'laerean praised, suddenly realizing what the bird was up to. *So smart I should have thought of that. Reehos are notorious wood-chewers.* He decided he would tell the bird which strands to attack, which looked the weakest and would be the quickest to cut through but his thoughts were smothered, pushed aside by the bird's own thoughts of escape. T'laerean continued to watch and worry and to feel the reeho's throat grow dry, its tongue and beak sore from the effort. .

Then he heard the humming again, the woman returning. It grew muffled, as if she turned and entered another room. Her voice was sweet, and under other circumstances T'laerean might have enjoyed it. The bird heard it too, worked faster, then it hopped back to survey its work. Big enough. The reeho edged

forward and squeezed out of the prison. T'laerean felt the pressure of the jagged edges of the wicker that poked at the bird's sides.

Free! T'laerean was elated.

The bird screeched in excitement and jumped from the counter, spreading its wings and flapping madly. The dizzying scents of the spices and the heating oil flooded the bird's senses, and T'laerean fought to emerge from the secret place and again persuade the bird which direction to go.

Through the doorway, T'laerean urged. He was focusing on the Force now more than the bird, concentrating on the Breath of Gelgellar, working with the energy. He let it control him, and he asked it for some measure of control in return. *The doorway! Yes, that's it, my friend. Free! Free!*

The bird flew through the kitchen doorway, through a study and over a dehumidifying unit and computer console. Toward another doorway, one open just wide enough, opening more -- the way outside!

Free! Free! No!

The door opened wider still and the bird flapped madly, rushing forward and slamming into the chest of Raenyn. The impact startled the child and dazed the bird. It flopped on the ground, stunned, unable to comply with T'laerean's cries to run away.

"Pretty reeho!" Raenyn cooed, scooping him up and calling to the smaller child. "You are not supposed to be loose," she gently scolded the reeho. "You are supposed to be dinner for Papa."

She held the reeho tightly and carried him through a side doorway, one that led to a small room with two narrow beds and a desk between them. Sitting unceremoniously on the closest bed, Raenyn roughly patted the reeho's head. The other child sat next to her.

"Is he hurt?"

"It doesn't matter." Raenyn held the reeho up and stared in its round blinking eyes. Her hands were not nearly large enough to fit all the way around the

bird. "Mama is going to kill him and cook him in the stew. I don't think I can eat a bite of him, though. He's too pretty."

The reeho kept blinking and T'laerean tried to focus. The impact with the child had rattled his senses, too, and he saw two of each of the young girls. Two of everything.

"She will pull out all his feathers," Raenyn continued. "You cannot eat feathers."

"He will not be so pretty then. I won't eat a bite of him either. I wanted him to be a pet."

"I wonder if he *is* someone's pet?" Raenyn lessened her grip on the bird just a little. "If he was someone's pet, Mama couldn't cook him."

T'laerean felt for the Force let it surround his mind like the marsh surrounded the settlement. Again he tried to clear his vision, saw the smaller girl purse her lips.

"He might be T'laerean's pet, the odd boy who doesn't farm mold," she suggested. "I saw him with a pretty reeho this morning. Maybe this one. We caught it in his house after all."

"T'laerean? The Wise Man of Kooroo's student?"

The smaller girl nodded.

"T'laerean would not have pets," Raenyn said firmly. "The bird flew in through the window. We saw it. T'laerean is strange and unfriendly. He cares only about the Force, talks only about the Force and impressing the crazy old Wise Man. He would not care about a little bird or anything else. He only wants to be important."

T'laerean cringed. *Care only about the Force? Is that what people think? Of course I care about the Force. But I care about this settlement, too. About the people in it. I'm trying to save the mold farmers!*

"Besides," Raenyn continued. "T'laerean is dead. I saw him when we caught the bird. Dead in his bed. Dead. Dead. Dead. Even if the reeho is his pet -- was his pet -- it wouldn't matter. Dead people can't have pets."

"Maybe we should tell someone that T'laerean's dead."

"No. Then we would get in trouble for sneaking into his house and finding him. Let someone else find him and get in trouble. He's not going anywhere, after all. He's dead."

A soft clacking noise came out of the reeho. The bird was still frightened. But it was tired and thirsty, too. So very thirsty. Its black tongue was dry and was becoming swollen. It looked up at Raenyn and cocked its head.

"Poor reeho," the girls said practically in unison.

The smaller girl started to cry. "We just can't let Momma kill him."

From beyond the doorway, the reeho heard humming, the woman's voice again. It was distant, signaling she was deeper in the house.

"No!" the woman hollered, her words sounding soft, but clear. "The reeho escaped! Chewed his way out. Girls! Come help me find him. He's probably still in the house. Girls!"

The girls glanced at each other, grins spreading wide across their wide Sullustan faces. Then T'laerean felt the reeho stiffen, fight to break free, saw a darkness looming before the bird, felt the bird being stuffed inside a sack. The reeho opened its beak to screech, and T'laerean concentrated with all his might. *Quiet!* he pleaded. *Be quiet and we might get free!*

"Mama thinks he escaped," Raenyn whispered. "We will keep him hidden. Then she will not kill him and we can share him as a pet."

The younger one made a tsk-tsking noise. "You can't keep a reeho in a sack. He will make noise, unless he becomes dead like T'laerean. And if Mama finds him -- alive or dead -- we will be in trouble."

"And the bird will be dinner."

"But maybe we can keep him in someone else's home."

"Who's home?" It was Raenyn speaking.

"T'laerean's, of course. He's dead and doesn't need his home."

"But someone will find out he's dead and we will be in trouble and then we won't be able to use his home for the reeho."

No one will find out if we bury T'laerean tonight, when no one is watching, when they think we're asleep. It's already starting to get dark outside anyway"

.

Raenyn softly giggled. "We could borrow Papa's shovel But let's go to T'laerean's now, hide the reeho. We'll go back after dark to bury T'laerean. If the reeho screeches in T'laerean's home, no one! will hear him."

"Well, they might hear him, but they won't pay attention. Everyone thinks T'laerean's weird."

T'laerean felt the bird being jostled, its fear rising to a fever pitch, and he suspected the girls were running. He heard doors open and close, sounds he knew but sounds that were alien to the terrified reeho. The jiggling and jarring sensation continued for several minutes, though it felt like an eternity, more doors opening and closing. Then he felt himself falling, landing abruptly and uncomfortably on something hard. The reeho shivered and picked itself up, stood in the cramped and dark confines of the sack and examined its wings and claws. T'laerean could tell that nothing was broken, though everything felt like it was bruised. The bird ached, all over and he tried to offer words that might comfort it.

But the reeho thrust T'laerean's thoughts to the secret place in its mind again and started pecking at the bottom of the sack, like a si-hen would peck at the ground for grain. Any movement seemed to cause the reeho additional pain, but it persisted, pecking faster when a bit of leather came loose in its beak.

"No, pretty reeho," Raenyn scolded. "Stop that. You will ruin my sack."

That is the idea, T'laerean thought. The reeho intends to ruin your sack just like you are trying very hard to ruin our lives.

Again the bird was lifted inside the sack, its escape thwarted. Raenyn shook the bag as she untied it and thrust her hands into the darkness. She grabbed the orange reeho as the sack fell away, and she held it about the back, pinning

its wings to its sides. It tried to bite her, but she had gripped it carefully enough so the bird's beak couldn't reach her small fingers.

Out in the open, the reeho could breathe again. It saw the Sullustan laying on the bed nearby. The Sullustan it remembered it was supposed to fly upon. The reeho relaxed in the girl's grip. T'laerean sensed it was conserving its strength, waiting. Her fingers opened a little. Then a little more.

Let her think you are docile, he urged the reeho. Let her think you are wounded -- which you are, unable to fly -- which you are not. When she drops her guard, you will fly to the bed and...

The reeho again thrus T'laerean's thoughts aside, pushed off from the girl's opening hands and spread its wings. It flew through open window and out into the growing twilight. It beat its wings hard, and ignored the ache in its body. It ignored the cries of the girls running behind it, their frantic footsteps. It ignored the old men who were going into their homes for dinner.

No! You're flying the wrong way! Fly back into the building! Land on the Sullustan -- the one on the bed!

And it ignored T'laerean.

The reeho, though tired and sore, flew as fast as its aching wings could manage, It streaked across the settlement yard, then over the glittering fence and across the swampy plains. The bird's keen vision cut through the growing darkness, like a sharp knife could cut through a crelnut. And from the secret place in the back of the reeho's mind, T'laerean watched with growing terror. The Sullustan's awareness was being carried farther away from the settlement. He felt the Force, the Breath of Gelgelar, and he sensed that it was controlling him completely. He wasn't strong enough to exert any measure of control over it. His mind was careening along toward the trees, piggybacked onto the brain of the freed reeho.

How long can I live this way? In a reeho's mind? T'laerean wondered. Will they bury my body, ending my life? Or will my body die for lack of food and water? Will my consciousness drift forever in this small brain? When the bird sleeps, will I gain the strength to coax it to do my bidding again? And what about the farmers?

The bird spotted the Sullustan mold farmers, now using large glow rods to see by. Sensor packs still trained on the ground, datapads recording the yield, they were close to the trees now. And they were closing on a trio of iquazards, massive boarlike creatures that had been cleverly hobbled to tree roots.

The reeho idly wondered why anyone would tie the iquazards, and ignored T'laerean's attempts to explain about the ambush and make suggestions that it somehow warn the mold farmers. The reeho wanted only to return to the embrace of the jungle, to the safety of the tall tress, to never see Sullustans again.

"Look!" T'laerean faintly heard from his small, secret place. "Iquazards! Three of them, and they don't seem to notice us." It was one of the mold farmers talking. "Everyone, come on. They move slow. We'll catch them and have a fine feast tonight."

The farmers would have to get close to the beasts, T'laerean knew. The iquazards were so thick-skinned they could virtually ignore blaster shots, except from close range. And close range would be too close to the jungle.

T'laerean heard the swish of the marsh grass behind the reeho, the snap of a dry twig. And through his shared senses he smelled the Sullustans, the vohis mold, the musky iquazards, the heady loam of the looming jungle. Darkness and green filled his vision as the bird swooped over the backs of the iquazards and darted between the trunks of two willotum trees and glided into the jungle.

Then a brighter green appeared, scaly and slick, and right in front of the bird. Black reptilian eyes locked onto the startled 'reeho. A young Glarsaur rose from behind a thick clump of ferns -- the one who tried to catch the bird several hours ago. The Glarsaur rose and started toward the reeho, flailing its claws and clacking its jaws.

The reeho screeched, an irritating sound now so very familiar to T'laerean. The bird banked away, retreating through the same gap the in the willotum trees, heading back over the iquazards and toward the swampy plains.

The young Glarsaur followed, disregarding the cries of the older Glarsaurs in waiting -- the curses that the ambush would be revealed. The Young Glarsaur

thrashed forward, intent on the reeho that it had been denied earlier, thrashed forward past the iquazards and into the path of the oncoming mold farmers.

"Glarsaurs!" one of the mold farmers bellowed. "Run! I'll cover you."

From his secret place T'laerean watched the mold farmers turn and sprint toward the settlement, their repulsorlift sleds filled with mold trailing behind them. One held his position for a moment, aiming a blaster in the vicinity of the iquazards and laying down a line of suppression fire to keep the band of now-revealed Glarsaurs from pursuing.

T'laerean watched the mold farmers melt into the darkness, heard the squeals of the disturbed iquazards, smelled the air tinged with the heat of blaster fire, felt a claw dig into the reeho's side.

The young Glarsaur pulled the bird in close to its body, and T'laerean picked up the reptile-man's foul, sickly sweet breath. The Sullustan was only vaguely aware of the continuing curses of the adult Glarsaurs; he was more intent on the orange bird's pain as a feather after feather was plucked. Then the Glarsaur bit into the bird, and T'laerean's world turned into agony and darkness.

* * *

"T'laerean. Wake up." The voice sounded weak at first, wobbly with age. But it was persistent. "Do not die, T'laerean."

The young Sullustan's eyes felt matted shut, but he forced them open and blinked. A little girl's blurry face hovered inches from his; Raenyn's. And beyond her was the wrinkled human face of the Wise Man of Kooroo.

"I thought he was dead," Raenyn announced. "Dead. Dead. Dead. I thought we would have to bury him and would never be able to tell I him about the Glarsaur ambush and about how my father used his blaster to fight them all off. About how my father is a hero to the whole settlement, saved everyone. And..."

"Do not chatter so, little one," the Wise Man cautioned. "T'laerean has been through a great ordeal, it seems, a sickness perhaps. Or something more. And

he nearly did leave us. But I think he will be all right now. The Force will continue to heal him."

The old human leaned over T'laerean, helped him up. Glancing around, the Sullustan could see that he was home, on his bed. Pale light streamed in through an open window, hinting it was morning. His throat was dry, and he was quick to accept the glass of water Raenyn offered. His belly felt empty.

"It was a good thing I came to the settlement earlier than I had planned," the old man began. "I stopped by to see you and found you close to death. If the Force was not so strong in you, I suspect I could not have saved you."

"Perhaps the Force is strong in me," T'laerean answered after a moment. "But I am not yet so strong in it."

"You are most wise to know you have limitations," the old man said, his eyes narrowing almost imperceptibly. "Rest, my student. You need more rest -- time for more reflections. We'll resume your lessons tomorrow."

"I have a lot to learn," T'laerean whispered. The young Sullustan relaxed, closed his eyes, and listened to the retreating footsteps of Raenyn and the Wise Man. Eventually he allowed sleep to claim him, and he dreamed of Glarsaurs and iquazards, and a colorful orange bird that would forever haunt a secret place in his mind.

Alien Encounters : The Shard

"Welcome home, sir, " Enthree said as his master entered his quarters on board the Star Destroyer Thunder. Commander Tobal Siy was not a happy man. Even a droid could see that plainly. That meant that N-3PO could see it better than most. The protocol droid had served as his personal assistant and valet for several years and knew his moods and manner well. "May I get anything for you?"

Siy loosened the collar of his gray uniform. "No, Enthree. " He paused, massaged his forehead with one hand, and sighed heavily. "On second

thought, bring me some water and a close of something to take care of this headache. "

The droid shuffled off to comply with his master's request while Siy collapsed into one of the room's padded chairs. Enthree returned quickly with a glass and a pair of white tablets.

"If I may ask, sir, " the droid ventured as Siy swallowed the pills, "are you ill or in need of medical attention?" Commander Siy took another sip of his drink, letting the warmth of it soothe him before he answered.

"No. Just another futile day of chasing Rebel smugglers through the sector. Enthree. They are like ghosts. Somehow they evade our every effort to catch them; probe droids. TIE fighter sweeps, sensor scans, orbital bombardments, nothing we try seems to have any effect. If we get word of a Rebel supply depot or base, it's always abandoned before we can get there. " Siy stopped and forced himself to unclench his jaw and take another sip of water.

"I'm sure that you will catch the Rebels in time, sir. " Enthree said in as hopeful a tone as a droid could manage.

"There is only one way that the Rebels could possibly be one step ahead of us all of the time. " Siy mused, speaking more to himself than the droid. "They must have a spy on board. "

"A spy!" Enthree squeaked. "On this ship? But, sir! That's impossible!"

Siy took another sip of his drink and said in an irritated tone. "I know that. I've had security tightened three times. There are no signs of any infiltration in our personnel. There are no listening devices, no unusual transmissions. No signs of a Rebel spy, but the Rebels are getting information somehow. " A wave of fatigue swept over Siy, and he set his glass down on the nearby table and leaned back in his chair.

"Perhaps you should rest, sir. " came Enthree's voice from what seemed like very far away. Siy felt like he was drifting off into sleep even as the droid spoke. "That's right, sleep and take your mind from your concerns. There is nothing to worry about. You should be feeling quite relaxed by now. " Commander Siy made a small noise and nodded his head a bit.

"Good, " the protocol droid said, its unblinking yellow eyes fixed on the Commander. "Now tell me. Commander, about the latest efforts to find the Rebel smugglers and the security measures you've taken to find any spies on board. " Commander Siy licked his lips a bit and began to ramble in a quiet voice about a new plan to Place Imperial spies in the ranks of the local smuggling community man effort to locate those smugglers who were aiding the Rebellion. He provided the names of the Imperial agents and talked about efforts to identify any foreign elements on board the Thunder that might be indications of a Rebel infiltration. The protocol droid listened carefully to Siy's every word.

"That's very good. Commander. " the droid said in a soft and calming tone. "Now, go to sleep and forget all about our little talk You will wake up in an hour or so feeling quite rested and confident that your plans will allow you to locate the Rebels. " Siy settled back into the chair cushions and promptly fell asleep. Enthree watched the Commander for a few moments until his breathing fell into a steady and even pattern. Then the droid picked up the water glass and dropped it into the waste-reclamation unit.

Enthree shuffled to the small maintenance closet in the back of the commander's quarters where the droid was supposed to spend its time recharging when necessary. The door of the closet slid closed with a faint hiss and Enthree opened a panel that concealed a small, but complex set of circuits and wires. The droid manipulated control studs on its own shoulders and chest and opened its chest panel to reveal the usual array of circuitry that made up the innards of a 3PO model protocol droid.

This layer of mechanics was likewise lifted away to reveal a glimmering crystal, nearly the length of the droid's torso, embedded among the mechanisms and wires inside Enthree's body. The droid swiftly and efficiently hooked up connections from the open panel to ports around the crystal, which pulsed and flickered with its own inner light. Once all of the connections were in place. Enthree began dictating a report that would help its Rebel allies avoid Imperial capture for another day and, perhaps, bring the Rebellion one step closer to victory against the Empire.

The Great Herdship Heist

Fifteen seconds. That was all the time Lyle Lippstroot had remaining in his misbegotten life.

He'd woken up twenty-one minutes ago in his rented living quarters, splashed a double handful of tepid water on his face, and draped himself in a loose-fitting Froffli smock. Vop, that greasy Rodian tyrant, had transmitted a new series of figures during the night. In his fifteen years as Vop's bookkeeper, Lippstroot had covered the loanshark's tracks, buried any number of illegal deals, and kept suspicious Imperial investigators vainly chasing their tails. In that time, he had grown to detest the way Vop the Usurer constantly reeked of cheap raava. And the depraved spinehead had never, not once, said thank you.

Lippstroot had picked up the waiting datapad, scanned the new numbers, and established a neural link within moments. His SoroSuub 221 cyber-interface, wrapping around the back of his skull like a broken halo, was still formidable, even after two decades of continuous use. A toothless Sniwian had once told Lippstroot that long-term cyborg implants made their bearers into unfeeling automa-tons, but he had bitterly scoffed. The SoroSuub band had not dulled the pain of a lost love, or buried the shame of his vile and petty career, or broken his addiction to lesai. The two-kilogram headpiece did allow him to maintain a direct link with Vop's mainframe and process numbers at blinding speed, and, at the moment, it was telling him he was in trouble.

His band now contained a Bartokk program-trap. Someone had sliced into the original transaction array and imbedded a new bit of coding. When Lippstroot had linked to the datapad, the virus downloaded into his headband and executed itself.

Within a millisecond, he identified the malignancy. Within two, he realized there was little hope. The Bartokk program-trap had last been used in a coup assassination on Turkana, and, as always, had proven fatal. The virus would create an overload spiral in his interface band and wipe his neural pathways clean in fifteen seconds. The only possible solution was to remove the system from his cranium, manually. Fourteen seconds. He reached up and flipped the outer Jocks. His left index finger drew back the durasteel release tab, drawing out a small square of sixteen grounding dots.

Eleven seconds.

He tapped a simple four-digit code into the dots and was met with a low, guttural buzz. Blast it! How could I have miskeyed that sequence?!

Nine seconds.

He re-entered the code, heard a welcome high-pitched tone, and waited until the three faint clicks indicated a dermal release.

Five seconds.

He punched the "retract" control, hearing a wet slurp as the deepest neural jacks withdrew from his cerebellum and retreated into their metallic housing.

One second.

With a hiss of equalized pressure, he slid the SoroSuub 221 slightly forward, preparing to lift the device off his head and heave it onto the stained carpet—

Lyle Lippstroot pitched forward, crashing into the low end table and sending three sealed disks of lesai sailing through the fetid air. He uttered a brief squeal, and was silent.

Dead.

* * *

"Down! Down-down-down!"

Kels drew the macrobinoculars away from her sweat-streaked face and squinted across the desert hardpan at the squat Tynnan demolitions expert. He had straightened up from the blast mine and was sprinting back towards her position as fast as his stumpy legs would carry him. He had a wide-eyed, desperate look on his furry, buck-toothed face. "Down!"

The human girl ran back four paces to their recently dug slit trench and dove in headfirst. A moment later, the Tynnan leapt in beside her, mashing the fingers of the her exposed hand with his left knee and clapping two webbed paws over his ears.

A deafening explosion rocked the desert. A scorching shockwave rolled over their heads, followed by a pelting rain of dirt and fire-blackened sand. The Tynnan let out a long, slow whistle through his front buckteeth, brushing dust from his sleek brown pelt. "Close call, hey?" He squinted up at Kels.

Kels glared back. "Dawson, for pity's sake, I thought you were an expert. Why'd it blow up early?"

The Tynnan ignored the insult and flipped down the ocular enhancer that helped compensate for his species' inherently poor eyesight. "Let's go have a look, shall we?" He vaulted the trench wall and began loping out towards the fresh blast crater.

Kels sighed. It had been three months since she'd agreed to apprentice herself to this motley band of robbers—one human, one Sluissi, and this scatterbrained Tynnan. She was the youngest of the group by far, but was becoming increasingly certain that these self-styled "master thieves" were learning more from her than she was from them. Their last attempt at grand larceny had resulted in a messy Shootout with a Sector Ranger patrol boat, stranding them in the Kamar badlands until they could make repairs to their ship, an old bulk freighter that looked like a pregnant bantha. To take advantage of the downtime, Dawson had insisted on dragging her out to a dry lake bed to test an eclectic sampler of safe-cracking explosives.

In the breast pocket of her coveralls, her comlink vibrated. She removed it, cupped it to her ear briefly, then shouted across the sand to her furry comrade. "Move your tail, Dawson! Noone wants us back at the ship."

* * *

Cecil Noone slid out on the repulsor sled from beneath his vessel, as Kels and Dawson trudged up to it. Sweat and engine grease streaked the dark skin of his face. He raised his grease-coated right hand and the laser welder he held in it, in a casual greeting,

"How's the Borogove, boss?" Dawson asked, nodding at hyperdrive components scattered on the desert floor around the carbon-scored freighter.

"Not as bad as she looks. Once I get her guts put back in, we'll be ready to leave this hotbox." Noone wiped his dripping brow with the back of his forearm, the only part that wasn't smeared with lube. "Just in time too. Get aboard. Sonax will fill you in."

Kels led the way, stomping up the extended ramp into the welcome shade of the Borogoue's belly. She slid the detonator satchel from her shoulder and tossed it onto her bunk with a clatter, drawing an annoyed hiss from the Sluissi hunched over the main data terminal.

"Careful!" the slender alien spat, rearing up on her thick muscular tail. Sluissi had two arms, but their bodies ended in a single tapering snakelike appendage. "Thossse are explosssivesss!"

"Not without arming pins, they're not," Kels countered. "Right, Dawson?"

The Tyrinan wrinkled his whiskered nose. "She's right, Sonax. But just the same, Kels, don't toss 'em around. These are sensitive pieces of work, and if you rattle 'em too much they could misfire or not go off at all." He cleared his throat. "Like you saw just thirty minutes ago."

Kels rolled her eyes. "Anyway. Sonax, what's up?"

The gray serpent slithered forward and coiled into a sitting position. Most of the Sluissi Kels had encountered in her life were an easygoing, methodical lot, but Sonax was distant, high-strung, and easily irritated. Kels found it hard to like her. "Guttu the Hutt," Sonax explained in her sibilant Basic. "He transssmitted on our private cipher this morning. He claims to have a job for usss."

Kels' mouth drew into a tight line. One of the things she'd learned about these thieves, besides the fact that they weren't nearly as competent as they pretended, was that they were deeply in hock to Guttu. Though the Hutt was only a mid-level crime boss on Nar Shaddaa, when he struck up a tune, this group danced,

"A loanshark'sss bookkeeper hasss been killed," Sonax continued. "The assassssins placed a program-trap in his cranial interface." Unconsciously, she lifted one hand to touch the metal band running beneath her saggital crest. The BioTech AJ^6 allowed her to work as the group's computer expert and

data slicer, but Kels suspected the assassination news apparently hit a little too close to home.

"The hit—did Guttu do it?" Kels asked.

"I doubt it. Not his ssstyle."

"What does it have to do with us? What is this job?"

"I don't know. Guttu sssaid he'll have the details for us when we arrive at Nar Shaddaa."

"So when are we leaving?" Dawson spoke up.

"Now."

Noone stood at the entrance to Guttu the Hutt's private penthouse villa, tugging at the hem of his ill-fitting jacket. The highest permacrete pinnacles of Nar Shaddaa's vertical city stretched into the rarefied air of the upper atmosphere. Noone blew out a frosty breath.

The Borogove had dropped into the system an hour ago, just in time to make Guttu's rendezvous. As the leader of his little larceny league, it was his duty to report to his Hutt creditor and accept whatever assignment the slug had cooked up for them this time. Hopefully, it would pay enough to get them out of the red with Guttu and leave a little extra for workday worries like food and fuel. Realistically, he knew they'd be lucky if all four of them evaded arrest and cheated death once again. One day, possibly quite soon, Lady Fate would deal the Demise card. And, with his recent string of luck, it'd probably come from the bottom of the deck.

He punched the entry bell again and drew the black shimmersilk cape over his shoulders. Beside him, Kels gave a brief sniff. Noone looked her way and raised one eyebrow challengingly.

"Do you always dig out your finest attire when going to visit a Hutt?" The snicker had spread into a wide grin.

"Guttu practically owns us," Noone replied. "I'll fill you in on the backstory some day, but let's just say a good impression can't hurt."

The grin faded, replaced by an expression of detached amusement. "Maybe so. But that style went out of fashion ten years ago, when I was a kid. Even in the Outer Rim."

Noone stifled an annoyed grunt. The girl was good, very good. She was an excellent pickpocket, a brilliant con artist, could fight well in a pinch, and had the potential to be a better card shark than he was. They certainly needed her skills. She just wasn't much of a team player. Not yet.

With a heavy groan, the golden-filigreed double doors swung ponderously inwards. Beyond, nearly filling the dim hallway with his formidable bulk, a six-legged Sludir stamped his left forefoot and beckoned with a humming force pike.

"My master will see you now."

* * *

"Noone! You inept, worthless sack of gravel-maggots!" Guttu's voice boomed through the narrow confines of his audience chamber.

Thank the Fates, he's in a good mood, thought Noone. He threw both hands out from his body in an exuberant gesture and approached the reclining Hutt. "Magnificent Guttu!" he responded in Hultese. "Benevolent benefactor and paternal pat—"

"That's far enough." Guttu halted him with a wave of his bloated hand. Large even for a Hutt, each year Guttu looked less like a sentient creature and more like a pasty lump of uncooked dough. He frequently boasted that he hadn't moved under his own power in 150 years.

At the moment, the Hutt was sucking on the roasted foreleg of some ill-fated herd animal. The meter-long slab shimmered wetly in the soft lighting as it emerged from his cavernous mouth. Noone glanced around the audience chamber. The rancid smell was still the same, as were the ostentatious tapestries and the absurdly thick-piled carpeting. The stilt-legged spotted bird, ruffling its wings and littering the rug with mangy feathers, was one bizarre addition. Cocking its tiny head, the creature scanned the floor for scraps or vermin.

Guttu leaned forward, peering intently at Noone's unannounced companion. "Who's the shadow?" he rumbled. His hover-chair whined as its repulsorlifts compensated for the shift in weight.

Noone nodded. "My apologies. Keis, the Great Guttu. Kels is the latest addition to my merry troupe. She's only apprenticing right now, but I think you'll agree that her talents make us more formidable than ever. She masterminded the firefacet crystal heist on Druckenwell, nabbed the four crowns of—"

"You're wondering why I summoned you." Guttu was clearly uninterested in Kels' resume, which Noone assumed was mostly fictitious. The thief put on his most attentive face.

"Two days ago a human was murdered. He was the bookkeeper of a Rodian loanshark named Vop the Usurer—a minor functionary for an inferior criminal. I care nothing for either of them." Guttu cleared his throat, a low, wet gurgle. "But the murder was orchestrated by my repellent rival, Ritinki the Bimm."

"The Bimm?" Kels said incredulously, seemingly oblivious to Noone's wagging shut up gesture. "You're saying one of those little pacifists is a crime boss?"

Guttu's laugh burst forth like a thunderclap. "Ah, humans!" he roared. "So pestilently common, yet so culturally ignorant. There are exceptions to every rule, my dear. Take myself, for instance," he continued, enunciating every word carefully as though he was speaking to an unruly child. "Hutts have an unjust reputation as cruel, selfish hedonists and shameless gluttons. Yet, you need only take one look at me to realize that is not true." As if on cue, he released a seismic belch.

"Er... yes, of course." Kels said hesitantly.

Guttu beamed at her, then turned his gaze back to Noone. "Ritinki and Vop plan to hold an amicable 'meeting of the minds' aboard the Ithorian herdship Song of the Clouds the night after next. I've learned that Vop plans to use the meeting as an opportunity to secretly purchase a sealed lockbox from the Ithorians. The money has already changed hands. The bookkeeper was to slip away after dinner and pick up the goods."

"But now he's dead," Noone commented.

"Precisely. Ritinki also got wind of the plan. He bumped off Vop's bookkeeper in a wretched, underhanded fashion and inserted his own duplicate in his place. And Vop, that wall-eyed fool, is nonethe wiser!" Guttu's flabby frame shook with laughter.

"So Ritinki's duplicate picks up the box and delivers it to his master, not Vop," Noone speculated. "What is he, a clone?"

"Bah. Not even Jabba could grow a clone. Most likely a surgical alteration, but Ritinki could have sprung for a holo-shroud. It doesn't matter, because it's not going to work." Guttu's eyes narrowed to golden slits. "You're going to steal the box before he gets there."

Noone swallowed. He expected things to end up here,

"Don't let me down, Cecil Noone. The vrbblthers are hungry this season, and I know a band of thieves who'd make an exquisite four-course meal."

"You don't say," Noone muttered, feeling as though he was sinking several centimeters into the carpeting.

Guttu forced the rack of oily meat into his cavernous mouth. then slid it back out again. "Forgive me. I have forgotten the duties of a host. Please, have some roba." With stumpy fingers, he pulled loose a chunk of milk-white fat and held it out, as if he were giving his pet nashtah a special treat. Noone stepped forward and accepted the quivering lump.

Guttu tore another scrap from the slab and idly tossed it into the far corner, where it rolled beneath a gaudy wall-hanging depicting the Third Battle of Vontor. The spotted avtan squawked hungrily. With a flurry of feathers it pounced on the tidbit.

Noone squeezed the piece of roba experimentally with his fingertips. It glistened damply with grease and Hutt saliva. "So," he said, "what are the details of the meeting? And the herdship's arrival time? Also—" He silenced himself as he looked up. Guttu was glaring at him sternly. Drawing a deep breath, Noone popped the pungent chunk of gristle in his mouth and smiled through clenched teeth, Guttu smiled back.

"Quammo will give you a datapad on the way out. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must begin my evening repast. You will return in two days with the lockbox."

Noone turned to leave, but Kels had one more question. "The box—what's in it?"

"My dear," Guttu said and chuckled. "I have no idea. But if it inspires this degree of backstabbing in two of my competitors, I want it."

* * *

Kels placed one hand against the bulkhead for support as the overloaded shuttle rose shakily from the landing pad. Dishes rattled, and one of the waist-high catering carts bumped painfully against her knees. She smoothed down her clean white uniform and glanced across the passenger cabin at Noone, who was securely strapped to his padded seat and clad in a spotless linen uniform similar to hers. He flashed a quick smile of reassurance.

She shifted her gaze to the window beside Noone's head and watched the blinking towers of Nar Shaddaa slip from view as the shuttle pilot began a slow banking turn. The bruised surface of Nal Hutta, the moon's swollen primary, was just beginning to rise above the jagged ferrocrete horizon.

It was a day and a half since their meeting with Guttu. When Kels and Noone had returned to the Borogove, both Dawson and Sonax had howled with outrage at the enormity of the task and the short time in which to prepare for it in.

"Two days!" Dawson had fumed, his beady eyes scanning the scrolling readout on Guttu's datapad. "Two days to get aboard this," he thrust the pad in their direction, revealing a schematic of a colossal, saucer-shaped Ithorian herdship, "and steal their precious box? Did that diseased slug realize that they're sealing off all space traffic to keep the meeting private? Not one trader, buying agent, or botanist is going to be permitted to dock with the herdship until after the meeting. Not one."

"Vops and Ritinki both know rivals might try knocking them off during the meet," Noone had commented. "They probably don't trust each other, either, which means each of them is going to bring his own personal army of security thugs. Add to this the fact that each of them is planning to walk off the ship

with this mysterious iockbox, and we can expect that herdship to indeed be sealed as tight as a drum. We're not dealing with fools here."

Sonax had waved slightly from side to side, one of her characteristic tics indicating nervous energy or bottled-up frustration. "So how do we get inssside?"

After six hours of dead-end suggestions ranging from the conventional (posing as a maintenance team) to the ridiculous (wrapping themselves in camo-netting and hoping the Ithorians would bring them aboard as strange new bioforms for the hardship's zoo), it was the dinner that finally inspired a workable plan.

Sonax had dug up a subspace call the Song of the Clouds had routed through system communications satellite 355-D. The party was being catered.

Not surprisingly, there wasn't much call for caterers on Nar Shaddaa. Most of the moon's inhabitants were destitute vagrants, uncultured smugglers, or decadent Hutt overlords like Guttu. Estimable Epicures was on the verge of closing its doors forever when the Song of the Clouds' transmission came over the comm. The request had thrown the two-month old company into a state of panic.

Estimable Epicures had a staff of twelve, down from eighteen after a Hutt suffering from indigestion launched six of their chefs into a nearby nebula. This job would put the fledgling company on the welcome path to solvency, but in order to handle an event that large, they had needed to double their workforce in twenty-four hours.

Frantic calls had gone out to the private kitchens kept by the oldest Hutt clans, apologizing for the short notice but begging to hire anyone with culinary experience for a temporary job. Three dozen beings expressed interest; only seven actually showed up at Estimable Epicures the following morning. The new arrivals were given cursory background checks, issued clean white uniforms, and put to work preparing the evening's entrees and loading them onto three rented shuttles. Thanks to some simple computer slicing on Sonax's part, two of the new faces belonged to Noone and Kels,

The shuttle's engines wheezed sickly as the ungainly vessel cleared the atmosphere and slid beneath the drifting, burned-out hulk of a Marauder-class

corvette. The space around Nar Shaddaa was littered with battered wrecks like this, Kels knew. She hoped the pilot had the good sense to shunt extra throttle energy into the particle shields.

The shuttle dipped sharply to avoid the slowly spinning torus of an abandoned turbolaser housing, causing the acceleration compensator to shudder and gasp. Through the pitted canopy visible just beyond the back of the pilot's chair, their destination came into view.

The Song of the Clouds was an awe-inspiring sight—a titanic bronze disc nearly a kilometer in diameter. Its edge was dotted with docking bays and airlocks, while its hub boasted a soaring transparisteel dome covering arboretums and manicured water-gardens. Like most herdships, the Song traveled the galaxy's hyperlanes selling rare and unusual merchandise to any and all comers. As a rule, the ladle-necked Ithorians thrived on interaction with other species, A herdship being hired out to host an exclusive private conference was unprecedented.

Their craft fell into position behind the other two catering shuttles and followed their exhaust trails to the nearest hangar. The pulsing blue rectangle indicating an atmosphere containment field grew in size. As the pilot made preparations for landing, a voice piped up at Kels' elbow.

"And how long have you worked in Tagta's kitchen?" The voice was irritatingly high-pitched, with a primly cultured accent. "We're a tight-knit bunch around here, and I don't remember seeing your faces before."

Kels looked over at the speaker, a short, stout human with a preposterously pointed mustache. He and his companions, two meek, golden-skinned humanoids of a species Kels had never encountered before, had arrived with the temporary help this morning. It wasn't clear whether he suspected something, or was merely being friendly. Quickly, she recalled their cover story. "I doubt you would have. We were transferred to Tagta's Winter Palace two weeks ago. Our master is currently visiting his permanent home on Nar Hekka, so we decided to make a few extra credits."

The shuttle settled in the bay with a rattle and a thump. The rear loading doors hissed open,

"Ah. Well, you had better hope he never finds out," the little man sniffed. "I've heard Tagta can be quite inflexible."

"We can take care of ourselves, got it?" Kels snapped, unbuckling her shoulder restraints. She had no desire to chitchat with an overinquisitive cook.

The man exhaled suddenly and noisily, as if he'd been punched in his ample gut, "Well!" His two companions were already pushing carts down the aft ramp. He whirled to follow them. "Just stay out of my way, amateur," he called haughtily over his shoulder. "I trained under the great chef Porcellus himself."

"Prima donna," Kels muttered under her breath, shaking her head contemptuously.

Noone gave her an expectant look and placed both hands against a metal handcart labeled CHARBOTE ROOT IN GUMBAH PUDDING. "It's showtime."

They wheeled the cart across the open hangar bay and into the winding corridors leading to the main atrium. Noone gradually slowed his pace until the group in front disappeared around a bend, then abruptly veered down a side passage and from there into a maintenance alcove. Kels popped the cart's corner latches, swinging open the side panel. Instead of gumbah pudding, the pushcart contained much less appetizing fare. One Tynnan and one Sluissi, horribly cramped.

Kels knelt and leaned forward. "Having fun?" she whispered with a grin.

Dawson growled. Sonax's shoulder was pressed against his ear, her elbow digging in his eye. He, in turn, had both feet wedged against the thinnest part of her tail. He clasped the detonator satchel against his chest protectively. "Oh, yes," he grunted. "Help us out of here, funny girl."

* * *

Dawson and Sonax stood perfectly still in the waste-reclamation chamber as the knot of Ithorians moved past in the adjoining corridor. Dawson waited until the sounds of burbling conversation had faded, counted five more beats, and palmed the door open. Stepping back into the hallway, he consulted his datapad for the tenth time since the two of them had headed off together.

Sonax slithered up beside him. "Give me that!" she demanded, reaching for the pad.

"Not a chance," the Tynnan countered, holding the device just out of arm's reach. "You'll just get us lost."

"We are losst!" Sonax hissed, as they continued down the passage. "We have to be back in the food cart, with the contents of the lockbox, before the dinner party ends. If you just give it to me, I can download the entire map into my interface band."

"And leave you in charge? Sonax, you'd become captivated by some mathematical singularity and—" Dawson stopped in his tracks, shifting his eyes from the datapad to the looming blast doors in front of them and back again, before finally looking over at Sonax. "And we're here."

The cargo hold on the Song of the Clouds encompassed nearly a quarter of the aft section, running just below the hyperdrive motivator and one deck above the sublight engine banks. According to Guttu's information, the lockbox was being stored deep behind these reinforced blast doors, in a shielded vault surrounded by an array of security alarms and a phalanx of armed guards. The direct approach would never work.

The duo retreated around the last corner they had turned, lest they be caught flat-footed if the blast doors suddenly rumbled open. Dawson pointed at the ceiling. "Access tunnels, right?"

Sonax shook her crested head, the pale lighting glinting off her interface band.

"The tunnels will surely be wired," she said. "I can bypass the alarms by accessing the Ssong'sss mainframe, but the blocks would be noticed by any alert Ithorian operator. And I am sure they have one."

Dawson looked worried. "So what..."

"So we make sure he doesss not remain alert. Hand me my box."

The Tynnan rummaged through his duffel bag and pulled out rectangular gray case about the size of a drinking glass. He handed it to Sonax.

"Boossst. Quickly."

Grimacing, Dawson dropped to both knees as Sonax flowed onto his back and shoulders. With a grunt, he staggered to his feet. Sonax wrapped her tail tightly around his chest for support.

Sonax popped the ceiling panel and slid it out of the way. "Hold ssstill!" she whispered down at her prop, and poked her head inside. The dim access passageway ran straight for perhaps ten meters, then split into three separate branches. Perfect. Resting both elbows against the edge to brace herself against Dawson's drunken tottering, the sinuous alien slid the cover off the small gray box. A hundred angry red myrmims seethed inside, their jaw pincers twitching greedily for an enemy to gnaw to pieces. Sonax dumped the box, sending the insectoid army boiling into the shadows. Rapidly, she ducked back out and replaced the overhead square.

Dawson sighed with relief as Sonax slid from his shoulders and back to the floor. "That will trigger every alarm they have up there," she told the panting Tynnan. "Meanwhile, we take the low road."

She was already removing the lower deck plate.

* * *

"Loolaiekkipaasookii-paesopili?" The Khilglowered at Noone angrily, whistling through his hullepi and stabbing one finger against the metal tray. "Hoodoffi dip—dip?"

Noone stared back apprehensively. He could speak five languages fluently, and could bluff his way through a dozen more, but he couldn't decipher a word of the shrill argot warbled by this feeler-faced alien. Maybe he was out of practice. Or maybe the Khil was drunk.

Trying to guess his customer's intent by intonation and body posture, Noone raised his serving tray and rotated it a quarter-turn. "If you don't care for the fleek-eel, sir, I also have canapes of poached icefish, dusted with..."

"Goohilli!" The Khil pounded his fist against the tray, sending several butter-basted land shrimp onto the floor. He slapped two clawed hands together in an elaborate and probably obscene gesture, and stalked off into the milling

crowd. Noone exhaled with relief as he bent to retrieve the fallen appetizers. So far, things seemed to be going well. Before their arrival in the domed conservatory at the herdship's heart, all the caterers had been thoroughly scanned for weapons or explosives, and all gastronomic delicacies had been sampled by an unhappy-looking pair of food tasters. The party was apparently running behind schedule, and their foreman narked orders while they uncovered the hors d'oeuvres, lit the flame pots, stirred the soup, and uncorked the Corellian brandy. The rich aromas mixed with the sweet scent of vesuvague leaves and donar flowers.

The main serving table, a mammoth wooden slab with seating for one hundred, sat directly beneath the apex of the transparent dome. At the head of the table were two carved chairs, so large they might more accurately be termed thrones. Side by side, they awaited the guests of honor. Neither seat was larger, more intricately detailed, or closer to the table than the other—clearly, appearances were key to this negotiation. To the left of the table, a large area had been cleared for the guests' mixing and mingling. At the periphery, just in front of the moss-draped treeline and meandering garden paths, Noone and the rest had arranged an irregular semicircle of catering carts.

The guests had arrived en masse a short time ago. Ritinki the Bimm and Vop the Rodian each had scores of underlings, hangers-on, and bootlickers in his entourage, and every one of them seemed to relish the welcome sight of an open bar. The atmosphere was becoming increasingly, earsplittingly raucous, as a sea of staggering beings downed various intoxicants and fought to shout each other down. At the moment, neither of the crime bosses had made an appearance.

Noone caught the flash of a bright white jacket through the press of bodies. Squeezing between two well-dressed Twi'leks engaged in a passionate debate over shockball scores, Kels sidled up to him.

"How goes the war?" he shouted in her ear.

Kels smiled slightly, lifted her right fist up to her shoulder, and spread her fingers slightly, showing him the distinctive outline of a Sif-Uwana certified credit voucher. The hand dropped inside her jacket and reappeared an instant later, empty.

"You lifted that? Off the Twi'leks?" Without turning his head, he shifted his eyes towards the two aliens, fearing the worst. They were still swapping bellicose insults, their head-tails gesticulating wildly. And clearly oblivious to their immediate surroundings. The tightness in his chest eased, but it was replaced by anger. He thrust a warning finger in the girl's face. "No more of that. Or you're off the team." He leaned closer. "We can't take the cart back if we're both shot dead. Understand?"

At this point in the scam, it was all up to Sonax and Dawson. All he and Kels could do was play out their assigned roles throughout dinner, scrape the leftovers off the flatware, retrieve the pudding cart from the side alcove where they'd left it, and load it back aboard the return shuttle. With any luck, it would be just as cumbersome as it was when they'd unloaded it, with the weight of two stowaways and the extra, ten kilograms of a metal lockbox. He glanced around at the revelers. Hopefully, none of them was especially hoping for a cold dish of gumbah pudding.

Noone swiveled his head in a casual scan of the room, and the tiny device rubbed against the skin of his neck. They were spending too much time talking together. "We'd better split up," he said "Just remember what I said about pinching. We're good little waiters, nothing more." He forced a hard expression on his face.

"How much is the voucher made out for, anyway?"

Kels opened her eyes wide as she stepped back into the crowd. She held up one hand, fingers splayed, as if waving goodbye to a friendly coworker. Now Noone couldn't stop the smile from reaching his lips and breaking into a full grin. Five thousand! Teach her some discipline, and she's going to make us the most successful thieves in the sector.

* * *

The throbbing hum of the security Held was quite distinct, now that they knew to listen for it. But the field was imperceptible on all visual wavelengths, and Dawson, clambering forward on all fours, had banged his head straight into it. He now sat back, grumbling and rubbing the singed spot in his fur.

Sonax leaned her head closer, almost but not quite touching the force barrier. She tapped the edge of her portable luma against it experimentally. It spat and crackled with taut energy. They weren't going to force their way past this.

Closing both eyes and drawing a deep breath, Sonax accessed her cybernetic band. The action was automatic, almost unconscious, but as always she felt a welcome surge of warmth and pleasure. This inner world was secure and comfortable, its silicon pathways as familiar as the crowded confines of Sluis Van Habitation Sphere D, where she'd lived as a child with her father and sisters.

In her mind's eye, an option matrix popped into view, its branching tunnels spreading out beneath it in brilliant streaks of green and red. She selected the two hundred thirty-second shaft on the fourteenth tier. Her consciousness shot into the tube, following it through dizzying drops and turns to its termination point, where an interlocking gridwork of fine mesh squares, rotating slowly in opposite directions, blocked all access. Sonax nudged the first grid into alignment, then the second, then the third. She slid through one of the myriad pinprick holes, emerging in a whirring, buzzing amphitheater whose lines stretched off into infinity. Number packets and strings of coding whizzed by as illuminated blurs, in a chaotic, clamorous jumble of sound and sensation. She had entered the-Song of the Cloud's mainframe.

Moments after she and Dawson had started worming their way through the lower maintenance tunnel, they'd come upon a miniature data terminal, just as she'd expected. It was a simple device, suited for diagnostic checks only, but it had a direct link to the main computer — a single subdirectory only, for the sole purpose of pulling repair logs. Using a cable jack, one end plugged into the data port and the other to her headband, Sonax sliced out of the directory and into the main drive. She disabled any latent intruder alarms in maintenance crawlway B43, then located the remote signal code and copied it.

The Song's remote signal code allowed datapads and other portable equipment to remain linked to the mainframe without being physically connected via a wire, jack, or scomp-link. This convenience was a standard feature on most large starships. After unhooking the cable, she wound it up and handed it back to Dawson. By duping the signal, Sonax could connect to the ship's systems at any time, so long as she remained on board. Just as she was doing now.

The cacophony of the Song's mainframe would have overwhelmed a purely organic mind incapable of perceiving its underlying structure. To a cyborg like Sonax, it was beautiful, a breathtaking masterpiece of intricate architecture. Dropping into position behind a pulsing data stream, she followed its wake through two virus filters and a password lock, coming up short against a towering bulwark representing Security Operations.

The virtual wall was studded with the rectangular protrusions of subdirectories; she moved into the slot at the intersection of column Mern-Krill and row 3135—Security Countermeasures. At her gentle prompt, numbers flew by at blinding speed, but she knew what they needed, would recognize it when—there\ The control command for containment field 776, crawlway B43.

A faint blue link soared off from the control command, heading off along another silicon pathway. If power were cut, the energy barrier would collapse, but a reflexive signal along this link would trigger an alert signal on some Ithorian tech's station. They might be too distracted by the myrmin infestation to notice, but it was better to be safe than sorry,

Sonax pushed the delicate link slightly, not enough to snap it (which could cause a menacing self-diagnostic program to burst into this sector), but enough to insert a temporary patch buffer. Turning back to the indistinct dark smudge representing the security field command, she shifted the numbers into a new, powerless alignment. As the blurred coding began to slow and cool, Sonax began retracing her steps back to the stable matrices of her own neural network.

She opened her eyes, Dawson was still rubbing the top of his head. The entire operation had taken less than one second of real time.

Beside her, the energy barrier sizzled, sparked with a thousand strobing dots of light, gave off one alarmingly bright flash, and vanished. Sonax reached up with her Juma again. This time, her arm passed easily through the junction and into the corridor beyond.

Dawson nodded appreciatively. "Excellent, Sonax, excellent. Great work."

Sonax was already advancing, snaking forward on her powerful tail. She found it much easier to move through the narrow passage than her two-legged Tynnan compatriot did.

"Quickly," she said. "We don't have much time."

* * *

The R'alla mineral water gurgled as Keis poured it into the Veubg's glass. She over-filled the glass, and the overflow splashed onto the white tablecloth, forming a spreading dark blotch. The Veubg seemed not to notice. Kels headed back towards the ring of carts, her heavy ceramic pitcher wet with quivering beads of condensation.

Things had settled down a bit since dinner had been started. Most of the guests were arranged around the heavy wooden table, the hearty mugruebe stew beginning to take the edge off their inebriated high. Ritinki and Vop had made their appearances, from opposite sides of the courtyard, immediately after the others had taken their seats. They had settled into the vacant thrones at the head of the table, their personal bodyguards standing at their sides and casting suspicious glances in each others' directions.

Kels twisted the spigot and held the pitcher underneath to catch the cold stream of bubbling mineral spirits. The tap was slower than she would have liked, and she glanced back towards the table. Vop, his green snout wagging, was speaking fervently to his disinterested rival. Ritinki appeared intent on to be brushing lint specks off his yellow cravat. The Bimm was so short his feet dangled far above the floor. Neither of the two had touched their food.

She also noted that there was no sign of the cyborg bookkeeper, The man was Ritinki's duplicate agent, but in order to maintain his cover, he should have appeared in Vop's entourage by now.

Kels checked the water level in her container—not quite full—as another server moved up behind her. She turned her head. It was one of the golden-skinned humanoids they'd ridden up with in the shuttle—stoop-shouldered, pot-bellied, weak-kneed, with downcast eyes that wouldn't meet her face. He and his twin had been bowing and fawning obsequiously since the first guests had arrived. Their compatriot, the pudgy, mustachioed egotist she'd snapped at earlier, was flitting from one place setting to the next like a witless moon moth dancing about a glow rod. He was clearly in his element.

The cool, swirling water finally reached the rim. She shut off the tap with her free hand, and turned back towards the table, "It's all yours, golden boy." The alien bobbed his head and stared at the floor. "Ma' thanks, ma' thanks," he breathed in a rapt whisper. Kels' lip twisted up in a contemptuous sneer. She hated rubbing elbows with snobs and submissives. The sooner this charade was over with, the better.

Overhead, the clear dome offered a spectacular view of the local constellations, countless stars circled by worlds whose inhabitants were surely having a better time than she was. Kels wrenched her neck, vainly trying to kill a persistent itch caused by the stiff collar of her uniform, and continued filling the water glasses where she'd left off. The monotony was killing her. Something had better happen soon.

* * *

The actinic glare from the tip of the fusion cutter grew brighter as metal began to superheat and vaporize. Dawson reached up with his left paw and tapped the side of his ocular enhancer, simultaneously darkening both lenses and increasing magnification by two hundred percent.

The cutting tool traced a burning white line down the side of the bulkhead. Dawson paused, then continued the incision by striking off at a perpendicular angle. Sweat beaded on his black nose. With steady hands, he proceeded through two more ninety-degree turns, switching off the fusion cutter when he'd returned to his starting point.

This is it, he thought. It took longer than we expected, but we made it. He secured a magnetic handle in the center of the square, which glowed a dull red as the severed metal cooled. Right here—he placed one paw on the handle and grasped it firmly—right behind this bulkhead, is the vault where they're keeping the lockbox. With a yank and a grunt, the square of metal came free from the wall. Behind it was more featureless gray alloy—the exterior of the safe. Dawson searched through his duffel bag.

He looked at his companion. Sonax sat motionless against the side of the crawlway, her arms crossed and her body bent so severely her head almost touched the floor. He knew the trance-like state meant that she was deep in a cyber-link, scanning for any silent alarms he might inadvertently trigger, but he still suppressed an involuntary shudder. She looked dead.

The brownish putty felt pliant and clammy in his palm. He tore loose four small wads, rolled them into balls, and pressed them solidly against the vault at the four corners outlined by the quadrangular hole. Into each pellet, he would insert a minute quantity of nergon-14.

And then, he thought with pleasure, we'll see what this vault is really made of.

* * *

Trouble. That's what Noone thought the continued absence of the bookkeeper meant. He'd expected the man to appear as part of Vop's retinue, and excuse himself at the conclusion of dinner to pick up the box that Vop had previously paid for. At least that was what Guttu had told them to expect. Noone should have learned by now that nothing ever went according to plan.

Noone once again scanned the alien faces seated around the table. Nothing. He gritted his teeth. Perhaps Vop had discovered that his trusted advisor was now a treacherous double, and had had the man executed. Noone didn't care one way or the other about the bookkeeper's fate, but such an action would mean Vop was likely to make other arrangements to secure his prize. The box could have been moved to another vault, or transferred to deep storage for pickup at a later date.

Guttu didn't like failure. Noone envisioned several vivid scenarios in which he was dragged down to the deepest bowels of Nar Shaddaa and thrown to a pit of starved vrbithers. In all of them, his suffering lasted less than ten seconds—which was the only good thing he envisioned about his future prospects at this point.

He shook himself out of it. There was no sense in brooding. There were dozens of likely reasons for the bookkeeper's non-appearance, and none of them had anything to do with a botched robbery attempt. Nevertheless, he was becoming worried for his team's safety.

Theoretically, Noone could contact Sonax and Dawson whenever he chose. Clipped to the inside of his starched collar, just behind the stylized double-Esk logo of Estimable Epicures, was a military-style comlink. The gadget had been scrounged from a Rebel Alliance field pack Dawson had picked up on the black market and could purportedly cut through any jamming field. It was keyed to

transmit directly into Sonax's headband, and she could respond on the same frequency. Before going in, they'd agreed not to use it unless absolutely necessary—there was no way of telling whether the signal would be detected by the Song's internal sensors.

Kels walked up beside him, each hand supporting a garnished plate of grilled crupa breast. "Left side," she whispered. "Twenty meters."

He turned his head in the direction indicated. There, emerging from the sheltering treeline surrounding the decorative garden terraces, was the bookkeeper.

He was a nondescript human, middle-aged, of average height and weight. The silver ends of his cybernetic interface were plainly visible on either side of his bald head. Noone squinted intently, but couldn't see any indication that the image was a holo-shroud projection. This meant nothing, of course—only the cheapest chop-jobs left a telltale blur, and Ritinki obviously had credits to burn. His instincts told him it was likely an expensive surgical alteration. Having never met the original bookkeeper, he'd have to assume that this was a perfect copy.

The man strode forward confidently, stopping beside Vop's chair and standing at attention, both hands clasped behind his back. The Rodian tilted his snout to gaze up at his employee with bulbous, expressionless eyes. His antennae dipped in casual acknowledgment, then he turned back to Ritinki and resumed his hooting conversation. Noone wasn't an expert on Rodian mannerisms, but unless Vop was an exceptionally good actor, he'd been completely taken in by the duplicate.

A few of the more gluttonous guests leaned back in their seats, already pushing forward plates tittered with heaps of picked-clean crupa bones. Other waiters moved forward to remove them. The bookkeeper would be leaving soon, Noone estimated. He hoped Dawson and Sonax were working fast.

* * *

"Three... two... one..."

Sonax winced.

The report sounded like a muffled blaster shot. There was less noise than Sonax had expected, but there was considerably more smoke. Dawson scrambled into the acrid haze and disappeared around the bend. Sonax stirred to follow.

The nergon charges had torn a ragged hole in the side of the vault. She prayed the Tynnan hadn't grievously miscalculated and destroyed the vault's contents as well.

Only Dawson's hindquarters were visible in the corridor. His torso was thrust through the blackened gash and his arms were flapping madly, as he squirmed and twisted. Sonax coughed uncomfortably and waited.

After a long, anxious moment, Dawson slowly withdrew his head. He sank to the floor of the crawlway, blinking at her stupidly.

"It's empty."

* * *

Noone was about to join the dish collectors when he saw the bookkeeper's head turn slightly. Noone followed his eyes—the man was staring straight at Ritinki. The Bimm looked up, and they locked gazes for an instant. The human gave a barely perceptible nod, and Ritinki gave a concealed head bob in return. The clandestine exchange took a fraction of a second.

Noone's blood turned to ice. He prided himself on his ability to read subtle gestures, nervous tics and hidden signals. It was a skill that had proven invaluable in countless games of high-stakes sabacc. And he would bet the Borogove that that little interchange had meant only one thing: Mission Accomplished.

He pressed two fingers firmly against his coliar, activating the hidden comlink. "Sonax," he murmured in a hushed tone.

Kels saw the movement, and leaned close. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

"We're too late," he shot back. "The bookkeeper wasn't moving after dinner after all—he's already been and gone. By now, that lockbox is safely stowed

aboard Ritinki's personal ship." He gave a tight scowl. "It's over." Lowering his head, he muttered into the comlink again. "Sonax?"

His answer was an abrupt burst of crackling static. After a moment of garbled nonsense, the signal locked onto the correct frequency."—oon—th-sss—onax. Go ahead."

"Pull out. The box isn't there."

"We know. We're at the vault now."

"Get back to the cart," he ordered. "The box is out of reach now, Guttu will just have to accept that."

There was a pause. "Noone, Dawssson says the box is probably on the Bimm's vessel. If so, I have the herdssship's arrival logs and know where it isss docked—"

"No, blast it! You can't board it. We don't have a plan, and we don't have time. Get back to—"

"But Guttu—"

"Damn Guttu! I'm not going to risk you two on a suicide run for a box. Now get back before—" A squeal of angry feedback drowned him out. Disgustedly, he switched off the comlink.

"Think they'll head back?" Kels inquired.

He glared at her. "Of course they will. Even I think Dawson and Sonax are a little odd sometimes. But neither one of them is stupid."

* * *

Dawson stood in the airlock, struggling to keep his breathing under control. Can't back out now, he reminded himself. Cold fear lay coiled in his stomach, threatening to bubble up into his brain. He forced it down again, and slowly, meditatively, exhaled. The sound echoed noisily in the claustrophobic confines of his vacsuit.

Ritinki's personal ship, the Asaari Wind, had docked at an exterior airlock instead of landing in one of the open hangar bays. When they'd discovered this fact, he'd cursed out loud. The only way into the yacht's interior was through the airlock's circular hatch, and the hatch was guarded by a pair of snorting, drooling, vicious-looking Gamorreans. The swinish aliens were too stupid to bribe, and any attempt at a con was likely to get you neatly halved by a vibroaxe. Sonax had been ready to give up, until Dawson had a flash of insight. Both berths on either side of the Asaari Wind were unoccupied.

They'd broken into this airlock, one slip over, which was vacant save for a maintenance locker and a row of dangling Ithorian vacsuits. With a great deal of effort, Dawson had donned one of the oversized suits, hitching up the baggy fabric and cinching it with engine tape around the elbows, knees, and waist. Sonax, however, was another matter. The serpentine Sluissi could not fit into any of the bipedal suits without an amputation or a miracle. After a short but heated argument, she'd agreed to climb into an equipment sled that he sealed behind her. She was curled up in there now and likely hating every minute of it. Dawson didn't feel much better himself.

The tiny light next to the outer hatch winked from green to red, indicating the chamber had reached total vacuum. With one bulky, long-fingered glove, he pushed down the manual release lever. The round hatch ground sluggishly upward, revealing an ever-widening slice of star-speckled blackness. His breath quickened involuntarily. Moving quickly before he could change his mind, he stepped to the edge of the airlock and shoved off.

He had only drifted a few meters when the tether around his waist extended fully, stopping him with an abrupt jerk. Puzzled, he twisted his head around inside the elongated hammerhead helmet. The equipment sled, secured to the other end of the tether, was still resting on the airlock deck, held firmly in place by the Song of the Cloud's artificial gravity.

If the suit had allowed it, Dawson would have slapped his forehead in disgust. Idiot, he thought. You should have pushed it out first. He considered reeling himself in and starting over. No, wait. Maybe I can still pull it loose.

He looked down at the rectangular control panel on the suit's left forearm. Like any standard zero-gee vacsuit, this one was equipped with maneuvering jets located just beneath each shoulder, positioned out from the body so they could be aimed in any direction. After an extremely unpleasant bout with

vertigo nearly six years ago, he'd avoided space walks like a hive virus. Still, it shouldn't be too hard to figure out.

The illuminated buttons were unusually large, built for awkward gloved fingers. He frowned as he scrutinized the spidery Ithorian script. "This one," he muttered.

A chime sounded in his helmet speaker as he depressed the button. With a hiss of escaping gas, the back jets shuddered to life. He jerked forward slightly, but was again halted by the anchored tether.

Dawson punched the control square twice more, hearing a successively higher-pitched tone each time. The hissing in his ears grew louder and the pull at his waist tightened as the jets doubled in strength. He craned his neck to look backwards. The tether quivered with tension. The equipment sled moved forward, scraping along the deck plates for about five centimeters, then stopped.

He turned back towards his suit controls, both jets still blasting at full force. Well, this is a bust. He searched the arm panel for the shutoff button. Looks like I'll have to go back inside and shove her out the old-fashioned way.

He suddenly lurched forward as if shot from a cannon. White stars burned brightly on every side, while the glittering gridwork of Nar Shaddaa, banded by a thin limb of faint blue atmosphere, appeared kilometers beneath his booted feet. His surging stomach fought to keep pace with his brain, which was racing at light speed.

His first thought—that the tether had snapped—was dispelled by a worried glance over his shoulder. He was towing the sled through open space. But the forceful tugging at his waist, coupled with the rapidly shrinking circle of the open airlock hatch, could only mean one thing. He was accelerating, and rapidly. Cursing, he stabbed repeatedly at his forearm, hoping to hit the cut switch.

Instead, he keyed for a hard left turn. The power of the leftmost jet was cut by half, shunting the extra force into the gas stream spewing from the right nozzle. Dawson whipped around in a tight arc, stars streaking past his faceplate in crazy bright stripes. The attached equipment sled swung around to follow and he found himself spinning out of control—metallic sled and spacesuited

biped twirling around on opposite sides of an invisible pivot point like partners in a Sarkan ballet. The burnished bronze expanse of the herdship's edge suddenly obscured the striated stars, then vanished just as suddenly as Dawson spun into another gut-wrenching rotation. Clenching his teeth in near-panic, he fumbled wildly for the attitude controls. Through sheer luck, he managed to cut power to both jets.

With no atmospheric friction he continued to spin, but at least he was no longer accelerating. Pushed forward in his suit by the invisible hand of centrifugal force, Dawson raised his left arm as close as the faceplate would allow and studied the delicate lettering intently. With new confidence and no small measure of relief, he pressed the keys that would cause htm to make a gentle right turn.

Dawson emerged from the violent gyrations as the left nozzle slowly bled off speed. He switched off power and breathlessly surveyed his surroundings. Pulse pounding, his fluttering heart forced a roaring stream of blood through his ears. Any moment now, the adrenaline would belatedly kick in.

Thankfully, he hadn't drifted as far from the airlock as he'd feared. There, not more than one hundred meters away, was Ritinki's ship, its slender nose plugged solidly into the adjoining airlock. The sleek lines of the space yacht were blemished by the barrels of heavy turbolasers and ion cannons, Dawson made a quick scan of the hull, identified his target area, and carefully jetted forward.

He stretched both arms out wide as he watched his destination grow larger through the distended faceplate. Built for Ithorian eyes, it distorted objects in his peripheral field of vision—a minor irritant. He concentrated on his breathing, and chuckled ruefully as he thought of his near-disastrous lesson in zero-gee maneuvering.

"Now I remember why I don't do this," he said out loud. "Wonder what Sonax thought of that." He laughed again, louder this time.

The Asaari Wind drew so close he could pick out the mynock sucker-marks on its slate-gray hull. He was approaching too quickly. He needed to reverse the jets slightly and slow to a crawl, or he'd smash into a wall of plasteel with enough force to snap a bone—or worse, breach his suit.

Dawson waited until he had glided just a bit farther, then swiveled both jets forward and released a light stream of compressed air. His speed dropped marginally. He held the button down harder, A little more—

Dawson gasped as a massive weight struck him squarely across the shoulders and lower back. His spine shrieked in agony as every nerve ending came alive with sharp, prickling pain. The next instant he slammed into the Wind's hull, and the air was forced from his lungs and his vision clouded with blotchy dark spots.

It was, like so many things, obvious in hindsight. The equipment sled, on a flexible tether, hadn't slowed when he'd applied the brakes to the vacsuit's momentum. Obeying the simplest laws of inertia, it had continued on a straight line until it encountered the nearest obstacle: him. And his suit jets. His carelessness had finally done him in, Dawson thought grimly. And worse, he'd doomed Sonax as well.

Both maneuvering jets appeared to be crushed beyond repair— neither responded to his frantic taps on the darkened instrument panel. The hull slid by beneath him as his gloved fingers vainly scrabbled for purchase on the welded edges of the armor plating. He would reach the aft end of the ship in a matter of seconds. Without suit power, he'd continue sailing out towards Nar Shaddaa, towed by the sled all the way. Dimly, he wondered if he would suffocate from lack of air before burning up upon planetary reentry.

He snagged a tenuous hold on the concave edge of an external sensor dish, lost it, and continued his slide. The rear sublight engine bank rushed up at him. Beyond it, empty space yawned, Well, this is it. Won't even get to near Noone say "I told you so"

Something hard-edged and solid caught him in his right side just below the ribcage. As his body twisted around the obstruction, Dawson caught a glimpse of the pointed tip of a subspace signal antenna. Flailing both arms like a drowning man, he snagged the slim spire and hugged it to his chest like a lover. The sled continued to coast, reaching the end of its tether and threatening to pull him loose. Dawson squeezed his eyes shut and held on until the tugging subsided.

It was nearly a minute before he had regained the courage to open one eye. The stars were still where he'd left them. He slowly unclasped his arms. With

the determined, precise movements of a climber free-scaling the glaciers of Toola, he inched several meters forward and down to what he'd tentatively identified as the ventral engine room. Nervous exhaustion started creeping into his muscles. Soon, his hands would start shaking. That's enough excitement for one day, he thought.

The fusion cutter was secured to the front of his vacsuit with a silvery X of engine tape. He ripped it free. From here on out, we 're doing it by the book. Igniting the cutter with a soundless burst of plasma, he started slicing through the hull.

* * *

The sugar beignets had vanished, the ryshcate pans held only crumbs, and the blicci-f lavored ices were melting to mush. Dessert had gone rather well, Kels thought, despite the minor panic when the catering foreman had been unable to locate the cart of gumbah pudding. Ever the professional, he'd pressed on anyhow, but the perplexed look on his face had been the highlight of Kels' evening so far.

Well, that and the boosted credit voucher. She smiled. Even though the Tynnan and the Sluissi had missed nabbing the lockbox, the evening hadn't been a total waste. Around her, Noone and the other workers glided to and fro, removing empty plates and filling small crystal glasses with thick, cloyingly sweet liqueurs. Kels chose not to join them. She needed a break.

The pompous little man from the shuttle strutted by her, bouncing daintily on the balls of his feet. He clasped a bottle of Gruvian Tovash in his soft hands, Kels decided a snort of derision would be wasted on the overstuffed buffoon, and lazily scanned for his two docile chums. Both aliens also held bottles of Tovash and, like their friend, were heading for the catering carts nearest the table. Odd, she thought languidly. Gruvian Touash isn't a traditional after-dinner drink,

There was a rustle of movement at the head of the table and an interested buzz from the rest of the room. Ritinki and Vop, their discussions concluded, were rising to exchange the ritual handclasp that would formally conclude the evening's festivities. Two silent bodyguards pulled the ornate chairs back from the table with a heavy scrape. Slowly, with great ceremony, the lanky Rodian and undersized Bimm walked between the chairs and ascended the raised dais

immediately behind them. As they turned to look out on their assembled entourages, four burly security goons filed in front to form a formidable protective barrier. One appeared particularly alert, but Kels figured that was probably because of the way his eyes seemed to bulge within his face that appeared to have been ravaged by fire at some point. Ritinki cleared his throat to speak. "Gentlebeings—"

Out of the corner of her eye, Kels caught a sudden flash of movement. Before she could turn her head fully, a thick plume of oily blue smoke boiled up from one of the carts with an angry hiss. She blinked as the billowing cloud stung her eyes and coughed spasmodically. A voice shouted, "Fire!" Through the growing haze, she noticed that two other carts were similarly smoldering.

Several of the guests overturned their chairs in their haste to reach the exit. Kels dropped into a crouch, danger senses instantly alert. She doubted this was a coincidence. If it wasn't, the perpetrators would have to strike immediately. She whipped her head towards the dais. The four guards had formed an impenetrable bulwark around their charges, their eyes intently scanning the crowd.

Except for the rightmost man. He was, incredibly, staring down at the silver pin ornamenting his black tunic. Staring dumbly, and opening his mouth to speak—

Kels eyes snapped into focus. That wasn't a decorative pin. It was a serving fork that cleanly pierced the narrow gap between the man's fourth and fifth ribs.

The man's mouth opened wider. A trickle of blood beaded on his lower lip. With a slow motion that put Kels in mind of someone moving in zero-g, he began to pitch forward—a movement counterbalanced by the backwards tumble of the gruesomely disfigured thug to his right. Scarface let out a gurgling moan, both hands tightly clutching his throat. Protruding from between his stained fingers was the handle of a carving knife.

The third goon stared goggle-eyed as his companions fell; the fourth went for his blaster. A flash of silver caught him in his left eye: he went down with a heavy thump. Simultaneously, the remaining guard drew his weapon from beneath his jacket and peppered the crowd indiscriminately with blaster bolts. Cries of pain and panic rang through the hall as the crowd continued its frenzied surge for the exits. Kels heard a crash of shattering dishes as if

someone had knocked over a fully laden cart. A snorting Saurton, eyes wide, came barreling directly at her in a mad, panicked dash. She got out of the way.

The fourth and final projectile, a broiling skewer with a small gobbet of meat still embedded on its blackened shaft, impacted the randomly firing blaster just above the trigger guard. The weapon exploded spectacularly, and its bearer went down with a stifled shriek. This time, Kels tracked the missile to its source, and gasped in astonishment.

There, grasping another piece of cutlery and cocking his arm back for a deadly throw at the fleeing figures of Vopand Ritinki, was the chef. The silly, pompous little fool she'd sneered at in the shuttlecraft. All traces of his previous demeanor had vanished. Above his wax-tipped mustache burned the alert, pitiless eyes of a professional assassin.

Before he could complete his throw, two great gouts of blaster fire erupted from behind him, streaking on either side of his body towards the dais. The golden-skins, standing behind an overturned cart, were firing heavy blaster rifles with the cool expertise of hired killers. At their feet was an open weapons locker.

A blaster bolt caught Vop in the back, and he fell to the floor, tumbling and rolling as his momentum continued to carry him forward even as life fled his body. Ritinki scampered to the far edge of the dais and leapt behind it, narrowly beating out a hail of superheated plasma bolts.

This was too much. Keeping her head down, Kels started backing away slowly, carefully stepping over the shattered crockery and puddled wine. The blue-tinged haze was beginning to clear. With any luck, she'd make it back to the treeline without incident, and from there, it was a short sprint down the garden path to the exit. She looked around quickly. Where the slang was Noone?

"Get down!" Noone's forearm hooked across her chest and she was thrown roughly to the ground. She twisted as she fell, hoping to get free, but he landed on top of her. A blaster bolt whined through the air where her head had been a heartbeat before.

"Thanks," she gulped.

He motioned to the periphery of the clearing. Several of the party guests now had sidearms out. They had obviously been additional security. They had their sidearms out now, and were trying to catch the assassins in a flanking maneuver. Unfortunately, Kels and Noone were in the crossfire.

Lethal darts of plasma traced a sizzling web above their heads. One of the goldskins was down, but the two surviving killers retreated behind a makeshift barrier of metal carts and wooden chairs. They were evenly spitting their fire between the encircling thugs and Ritinki, their remaining target. From her vantage point on the atrium floor, Kels could see the tiny Bimm cowering behind the blaster-chewed tip of the dais. His men had the executioners greatly outnumbered, but after seeing their lethal skills in action, Kels still put Ritinki's survival odds at ten to one.

Over the din, Noone shouted in her ear. "Some party, huh?"

Kels barked a bitter laugh. "You're a master of understatement. Did you see it coming?"

"Not at all," he replied. "Kid, I think we've stumbled into the middle of a mob hit!"

A poorly aimed shot tore a jagged furrow into the ground near their huddled forms. By unspoken agreement, they both started squirming on their bellies out of the immediate line of fire.

"Where in the galaxy did they dig up those blaster rifles?" Noone grunted,

"Smuggler-style weapons locker," Kels answered. "Sensor shielded beyond reason. Looks like we weren't the only ones to think of stowing something in a cart." On her elbows, she wormed her way past a dead Nimbanel. "What I don't understand is where the smoke diversion came from."

Noone nodded. "I think I can help you out there. Gruvian Tovash, when mixed with ryll spice, reacts in a rather alarming fashion. And there was plenty of both substances in use here tonight."

Kels shook her head in disbelief. "A mob hit. Just your luck. Who do you suppose is behind it?"

"Not Guttu, that's for sure. He only wants the box." He pursed his lips as two more bodyguards fell, blaster-wounds smoking in their chests. The "chef" and the surviving golden-skinned humanoid were still firing doggedly. "Those characters are experts. And experts don't come cheap. We're looking at a major Hutt player here. Durga, possibly, or maybe even Jabba himself,"

Kels looked across the floor at Ritinki. The Bimm was still crouched in the protective umbra of the raised dais. Sprawled a short distance away was the crimson-perforated body of his phoney cyborg bookkeeper.

Persistent barrages of incoming blaster fire prevented the cringing Bimm from moving out of his isolated shelter. As Kels watched, he slowly withdrew a long, metallic object from beneath his patterned waistcoat.

"Watch your head," she warned Noone. "Looks like Ritinki's finally getting a blaster out." She looked again. "No, hold on. It's not a blaster. Some kind of electronic control, I think."

The Bimm tapped a key sequence into the face of the device, then reached into another pocket and removed an emergency breathing mask. Snapping an oxygen cartridge into its base, he slipped the mask over his mouth and nose.

"Gas!" Noone shouted. "He must be planning to flood the room with nerve gas. Kid, we need to get out here now."

Kels looked at the crisscrossing tangle of deadly bolts that laced the charged air of the atrium. The bright streaks burned afterimages on her retina. "Easier said than done."

* * *

As they'd expected, the Asaari Wind was deserted. Dawson cautiously padded through the empty corridors, Sonax gliding sullenly at his side.

"You said you knew what you were doing," she spat. The out-of-control banging of the equipment sled during their zero-gee hop had raised several welts on her smooth gray skin.

"For the hundredth time, I'm sorry," he pleaded. "Physics isn't exactly my strongest suit. And anyway, I got us here, didn't I?"

She hissed through her peglike teeth. "Barely. And now you've got to get us back the same way."

A sour expression crossed Dawson's face. After cutting an access hole into the small, sealed engine chamber, he had hastily patched the breach before throwing open the chamber door. With pressure equalized, he'd shed the ruined Ithorian suit and freed Sonax.

But with Gamorreans standing guard outside the docking hatch, they had no choice but to leave in the same manner they'd arrived. Dawson had located a replacement human-sized vacsuit from the Wind's supply closet—a little large, but it would do. He'd desperately hoped to find a Sluissi suit, but once again Sonax was out of luck. He thanked the Fates that the equipment sled was still intact.

An indicator light on Sonax's cyborg band flashed red as she accessed her internal chrono. "We're running out of time. Find the box and let'sss go."

Dawson's footfalls echoed down the passage. "Let's see. If I were a wealthy, underhanded Bimm crimeiord with a ruthless streak and a taste for expensive starships, where would I put it?"

He started to raise one paw to his chin theatrically, but halted in mid-motion. "Do you hear that?" His pointed ears twitched.

Sonax cocked her head. The faint buzz Dawson had heard doubled and tripled in strength. The sonorous thrumming was now unmistakable. A moment later, the deckplates began to vibrate.

The ship was powering up.

Sonax and Dawson looked at each other—one accusatory, one apologetic. Dawson found his voice first. "Uh oh,"

* * *

Kels gritted her teeth. A mad sprint through the fire zone would be suicide. If Ritinki had donned the oxygen mask so he could engulf the area with poison fumes as Noone kept insisting, they were doomed.

She scanned the room one last time. They had little choice. Noone was already crouching into a sprinter's start, preparing to make break for it. He looked over at her reassuringly, "Ready? One. Two—"

"Wait!" she shouted, grabbing his arm. He followed her gaze, staring straight up at the apex of the dome overhead. An oblong patch of shimmering stars was no longer visible. In its place was an indistinct dark blotch, evenly dotted with blinking red lights.

They looked like starship running lights. And they were getting closer.

Noone swallowed. "I don't think that was a nerve-gas controller after all. Find something heavy and hang on to it!"

The lights grew brighter. The dark shape grew larger.

And, with a deafening crack of shattered transparisteel, the Asaari Wind crashed through the skylight. Thousands of jagged glassine shards rushed out through the gaping hole as the escaping atmosphere vented into space. Kels desperately wrapped both arms around a heavy Andoan wine-cask.

The two assassins, caught almost directly beneath the breach, were swept up in the smoky vortex along with assorted chairs, carts, and spent blaster cartridges. Limbs flailing, the white-jacketed chef bounced hard against the hull of the Asaari Wind— holding steady amid the maelstrom—and continued out into cold blackness, head bent back at an unnatural angle. The goldskin squeezed the trigger of his rifle until the bitter end, spraying the room with blaster fire even as space's vacuum sucked him inexorably to a swift and painful death. The surviving security personnel dove desperately back to the treeline for something to cling to. Some succeeded, others were sucked screaming into the void.

Kels turned her head towards the dais, away from the stinging grit of on rushing dirt and debris. Ritinki, bracing himself against the platform's edge, held one hand squarely over his breathing mask as the atmosphere continued its rush into space. Kels' anchoring barrel slipped across the floor, its weight no longer enough to withstand the terrifying gale.

And then, miraculously, the movement stopped. A shimmering force field snapped into place across the underbelly of the dome to plug the ragged break. The violent turbulence ceased, and smalt bits of loose wreckage began raining back to the floor. Kels gasped in the thin air and shakily stood up.

A transparent dome was a rather vulnerable structure to place at the heart of a spacegoing vessel. The Song of the Clouds must naturally have an emergency system that lets the central computer to seal off the dome with an atmosphere containment field in the event of a canopy breach. But what had taken so long, Kels wondered. There should be a sensor dish at the lip of the dome that instantly triggered the field at a sudden drop in atmospheric pressure.

She scanned the rim of the dome, and found her answer—and immediately wished she hadn't. The sensor dish she had expected to see had apparently been struck by a stray blaster bolt. The housing was a twisted, black mess with melted components dangling from it.

Noone staggered weakly over to Kels. He pointed to the sensor box Kels had already spotted. "We've still got to go," he croaked. "That's not going to hold long. The shunting chips are probably fused and are going to overload any minute."

As if on cue, a shower of sparks erupted from the damaged sensor.

Kels glanced at Ritinki, who tapped a command into what she now recognized as a beckoncall—a ship's remote control. The Asaari Wind, hovering five meters above the ground, suddenly dropped like a rock, landing on the ponderous wooden dinner table and crushing it to splinters. The Bimm grimaced and punched another button. The Wind bobbed up a meter on its repulsorlifts, rotating in a slight circle as the boarding ramp gracefully extended. With surprising quickness, Ritinki rounded the dais and sprinted across open ground for the hatch—

Only to be knocked flat on his back as the ship's ventral turbolaser blasted a bantha-sized crater near his feet.

The cockpit viewports swung into view as the Wind continued its slow turn. Kels couldn't believe his eyes. Through the tinted glass, waving both arms excitedly and mouthing something inaudible, was Dawson.

Noone pulled Kels to her feet. "Come on," he wheezed.

They ran for the shadowy rectangle of the yacht's welcoming ramp, past the still body of Ritinki the Bimm, Stunned insensible by the shockwave, Kels guessed when she didn't see any lacerations or burns on the body. She reached the edge of the ramp as her knees buckled with fatigue. Gasping, she fell to her hands and knees on the cold metal. Noone moved ahead of her, fighting the wind caused by cabin pressure venting through the open hatch.

The field control box overhead let out a piercing whine and burst into a cascading sparks. Kels looked up. The emergency energy shield flickered feebly, and vanished,

The room exploded in a thunderous roar, as space tried once again to claim its tenuous gasses. Still hovering, the starship bucked roughly in the tempest, and Kels found herself slipping off the side of the ramp. As her fingers desperately sought purchase, they squeaked across the polished surface. Then a gray hand firmly grabbed her left wrist.

Kels looked up. Sonax grimaced down at her. The Sluissi's tail was wrapped securely around the ramp's left support piston. With a whip-like jerk, she pulled them both inside as the ramp started to raise.

And, buoyed by the rushing atmosphere, the Asaari Wind climbed for the stars.

* * *

The lockbox rested in Noone's lap, glinting dully in the bright track lighting of the yacht's passenger cabin. He tapped the silvery sheen with one knuckle experimentally, "Dawson, you're sure you disabled the anti-tamper safeguards." It was not a question.

The Tynnan looked up from his reclining position on the floor near Noone's padded acceleration couch. "Boss, I went over it a hundred times. It's safe. I guarantee it." Noone still looked dubious. "What's the matter, don't you trust me?"

Noone snorted. "Now's not the time to ask that question, my furry friend." He was still a bit angry over Sonax and Dawson's failure to obey his recall order,

but this was a band of thieves, not a crack stormtrooper regiment. Besides, he'd been in this business long enough to know you didn't argue with success.

Through the starboard porthole, wispy strands of luminescent vapor swirled past in mindbending kaleidoscopic patterns. They had flown their stolen starship into the vast radioactive nebula near Nal Hutta—not far enough so that they might lose their way in there, but deep enough to discourage pursuit.

He sighed heavily. "Well, here goes. You all might want to take a few steps back in case it blows up in my face." Dawson rolled his eyes. Kels and Sonax actually moved a half step closer, so as not to miss the unveiling.

With a muted click, Noone released the locking clips with a twist of both thumbs. Putting gentle pressure on the ribbed metal siding, he cautiously lifted the hinged top. Four heads clustered together for a clean view of the contents.

"It'sss—" Sonax began.

"It's a gun," interrupted Kels.

"Huh," muttered a clearly nonplussed Dawson.

Snugly ensconced in a shock-resistant foam casing, the two halves of the black weapon—barrel and stock—crawled with external wiring and electrical relays. When properly fitted together, it would be about the size and heft of a blaster rifle.

Noone removed the stock carefully. "Some powerful people are very interested in this, people." He handed the stock section to Kels, then offered the barrel to Dawson. "Any idea what it is?"

They sat in study for a moment. A soothing hum of static reverberated through the room, as irradiated gasses washed against the energy shields.

Dawson finally hazarded a guess, "An Imperial prototype weapon of some kind? It seems equipped to shoot electromagnetic waves, but I don't really know what that would be good for."

Kels looked up with wide eyes. "It's a Gun of Command."

Everyone turned to stare at her. "A what?" said Noone.

She held the stock out towards them. At its base was a short line of tiny, machine-stamped lettering in an unfamiliar script. "That's Hapan. It identifies this as a product of the Royal Armaments Guild of Charubah."

She knows Hapan, Noone thought. Another surprise. "Kid, the Hapes Cluster has been sealed off from the galaxy for three thousand years. I've never even heard of—"

"The Gun of Command fires a magnetic burst strong enough to temporarily scramble the brain of even the strongest foot soldier," Kels continued. "It turns beings into weak-minded morons who follow any order they're given, no matter how outrageous. Simply put, it's irresistible."

Noone leaned back heavily in his seat. "I see. I think I'm beginning to see why Ritinki and Vop were so interested in this little box,"

Kels nodded, "There's no limit to what an ambitious and scruple-free crimelord could accomplish with a fully functional Gun of Command."

"In that case," Noone grinned broadly and laced his fingers behind his head, "we don't want Guttu's greasy paws on the trigger."

Dawson's mouth opened in astonishment. "Boss, what you're saying is—"

"What I'm saying," he interrupted, "is blast Guttu out the airlock. There are plenty of groups out there who'd pay an emperor's ransom for this gadget. The Corporate Sector Authority, the Rebel Alliance, the Empire—"

Sonax uttered a hiss that was low and full of menace. Her hatred of the Empire ran deep, and all of them knew it. Noone held up his hands. "Okay, maybe not the Imps. But we're sitting on a crysopaz mine here, and I'm not about to voluntarily turn the deed over to that stinking Hutt."

"But what about the Borogove?" Dawson wailed.

Noone made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the expansive passenger cabin. "I rather like our new accommodations, myself. Comfy chairs, greel-

wood paneling, and a galley selection to kill for. We've always dreamed of making a big heist. Well, my friends, this is it."

"But Ritinki—"

"The Bimm is dead," Noone said, getting to his feet and heading down the arching corridor towards the cockpit. "Nobody left in that room could possibly have survived."

He reached the helm and settled into the pilot's seat. "This ship is ours now," he said, flipping the startup switches. "But if you really miss that old rattletrap all that much, Dawson, you're welcome to come back here sometime and try to break her out of impound."

Sonax glided into a seat behind him and took up her customary navigator's position. Hands dancing across the control board, Noone brought them out of the enshrouding nebula. The varicolored gasses parted like a curtain. With a triumphant whoop, he threw the overmuscled space yacht into a tight barrel roll.

"Hang on tight, folks," he shouted exuberantly. "We've got a fortune to make."

The starlines shivered, and the Asaari Wind vanished into hyperspace.

Fair Prey

"Six meters of muscle, teeth, and venom."

Tyro Viveca, the galaxy's wealthiest Krish, raised his glass and took a long sip of dun brandy.

"Hyperfast reflexes and a vicious streak as wide as the Cron Drift. I'd say you're looking at the most efficient predator in history."

He loosed a razor-edged smile at his visitor.

"My taxidermist just stuffed it this morning."

The alien's guest politely stepped forward and leaned in to examine the specimen: a gray-green tube of flesh, looking like the repulsive offspring of a serpent and an eel, coiled on a polished wooden base. Its head, frozen in mid-strike, was a mass of glistening white spikes.

"Impressive," the man said, raising his eyebrows quizzically as he turned back toward his beaming host.

"Aren't Florn lamproids sentient?"

"Unquestionably. Though they lack the culture and art you and I take for granted, they have the brains to solve fiendishly complex puzzles. That's what makes them such a smashing hunt."

Viveca strolled to the side table and removed the crystal stopper from a heavy cut-glass decanter.

"More brandy?"

The visitor shook him off with a wave of his hand and settled back into an armchair with a squeak of leather and a sigh of cushioning. His bright eyes scanned his surroundings for the dozenth time. The room was an enclosed octagon with pillars at the corners, dark walls trimmed with gold. A pair of holographic lamps provided dim illumination, but he could clearly make out the severed heads of a hundred sundry creatures, each mounted on a varnished plaque bearing the unlucky beast's species, weight, planet of origin, and date of death. Seven niches held full-sized predators arrayed in fearsome poses; the eighth held Viveca's rarest firearms and his collection of antique water pipes.

The entire room stank of tabac and desiccated hides.

"That's the male, you know."

Viveca held his half-filled glass on the balls of his scaled fingers, swirling the liquid lazily. His guest looked up questioningly.

"The lamproid," Viveca explained. "I killed and mounted the male. I sedated and captured his mate, and have her locked on the grounds for a later hunt. Perhaps you'd care to join me."

"Perhaps," the visitor answered, resting both booted feet on a bantha-leg ottoman. "But I believe we have business to take care of first."

"Indeed," remarked the paunchy Krish. "I seldom receive uninvited callers, because most beings realize my time is of immense value. You claim to have something to show me."

It had better be worth it."

"Don't worry," assured conman Cecil Noone, sliding a ribbed metalbox out from beside his chair and flashing the most charming grin in his arsenal.

"You won't be disappointed."

The skies of Kabal opened up for the third time that morning. Kels Turkhorn snarled and resisted the urge to sprint for the awning of the nearest merchant tent. The locals took the sudden cloudbursts in stride and Kels didn't want to give off an outsider's vibe. Fat raindrops splashed on her nose, matted her whitish hair, and trickled down the back of her neck.

The busy marketplace carried the hot scent of sweat and the salty tang of the coastal breeze. Mindful of the unfamiliar bodies in close proximity, Kels clutched her supply bag with both hands. Even a professional pickpocket could sometimes get taken to the cleaners.

The drenched bazaar was one of the few public attractions in Palisade, a small coastal community on Kabal's largest equatorial island. Less than a year ago the planet had been disciplined by a wing of Imperial TIE bombers for declaring its neutrality in the Galactic Civil War. But the damage had been confined to Kabal's capital city, half a hemisphere away. The residents of Palisade continued to lead quiet, industrious lives centered on fishing and a modest tourist trade.

A burst of loud, mocking laughter caught Kels' attention.

Farther down the boulevard sat another trader's stall, this one with a dirty gray awning instead of the striped pink and white ones that draped the bazaar in incongruous gaiety.

Starship parts, dead appliances, plastic sandals, and other miscellaneous junk lay piled on the stall's front display table. The proprietor, a female Squib with grease-stained fur and one clipped ear, was leaning out of the booth and shaking her fist menacingly.

"This new wire, you say?" screeched the Squib. "Not likely, I say! This junk!"

She tossed a small coil of golden wire back to her customer and crossed her arms in smug satisfaction.

"You barter with that? You crazy!"

Kels saw the target of the Squib's abuse and closed her eyes in resigned pain.

"Dawson," she muttered, and moved quickly through the crowd to her compatriot's rescue.

Dawson stood barely a head taller than the diminutive Squib. A Tynnan, his aquatic mammalian ancestry was evident in his webbed paws and sleek brown pelt. Dawson tried to say something but was cut off with a fresh gush of invective.

"That junk!" the Squib chittered. "You junk! You ugly face! You teeth look like two big deckplates!"

Two tall, red-maned aliens who were lingering nearby to watch the exchange roared with laughter and looked at the Tynnan to see if the taunts would spark a reaction.

Kels came alongside Dawson and placed one hand on his shoulder.

He peered up at her through the lenses of his ocular enhancer.

"Kels!" he cried in welcome.

"Just handling a delicate bit of negotiating."

"Right," she said dubiously, eyeing the twenty-centimeter white plastic sphere balanced in Dawson's right palm. "What kind of equipment is that?"

"You ever hear of a Quay?" he asked.

"It's a novelty item. A 'preprogrammed prognosticator.' You ask it a question, and it spits out one of several stored answers."

Dawson was animated, visibly excited about his discovery.

Raindrops tumbled from his quivering whiskers.

"I've counted three already."

"It's a toy?" Kels snickered, disgusted. "You're haggling for that little thing?"

"Little, yeah!" cackled the Squib. "Size of you brain!"

The two tall aliens laughed again, shaking their shaggy manes and dousing the vicinity with spray.

Kels turned to the Squib, annoyed.

"You always treat your customers this way?" she snapped.

"Customer? Hah! News to me. You no buyin', you no customer."

The Squib grinned up at her onlookers who responded with appreciative guffaws.

"Let me see that," Kels told Dawson.

She took the sphere from the Tynnan's paws and shook it.

"THE SPIRITS SAY YES," boomed the Quay.

Kels took two steps backward as if frightened, bringing her to the far end of the display table.

"It's stupid," whined Kels petulantly, gripping the Quay in both hands and thrusting it away from her body as if it were a poison-ous snake.

"I don't want it." She suddenly threw the Quay up in the air, a steep, high arc. The others' eyes looked skyward to follow its path. As Kels brought her arms down, she closed each hand around a power coupling and lifted them from a stack on the table. By the time the toy landed in the Squib's paws, the couplings were tucked away in Kels' waistband sash.

"You done it now!" yelled the Squib, as Kels spun on her heel and walked away.

"Broke for sure! You clumsy!" The Squib glared at Dawson, baring her teeth threateningly, then looked down at the Quay.

"You broke?" she asked, shaking the toy.

"MY REPLY IS NO."

The Squib, pleased with her joke, looked up at the tall aliens who threw back their heads and howled as if they'd just witnessed the funniest thing in the galaxy. Dawson excused himself and trotted after Kels.

"Wait up!" he shouted, struggling to catch her on his squat legs. She looked back and slowed her pace. Dawson came alongside, splashing through a puddle and ejecting a spray of mud flecks. Kels looked away from the misty coastline toward a distant green swelling of land at the island's interior.

"Wonder if Noone's having any luck?"

Recently, Noone, Kels, Dawson, and the Sluissi cyborg Sonax had finally scored in their career as thieves, nabbing a priceless Hapan Gun of Command. In the process, they'd double-crossed their former Hutt employer, killed a Bimm crimelord, and added insult to injury by stealing the late Bimm's private luxury yacht. Noone, their leader, had urged his employees to be patient. Once the sale of the gun netted them a fortune, they'd never again have to worry

about crime bosses with burning vendettas. But weeks later they were still waiting, and patience was in short supply.

The meeting with the Rebel Alliance had been a joke. Despite the Rebels' rumored victory at an Outer Rim bolthole called Yavin, the self-righteous flagwavers didn't have two scrip coins to rub together. The fresh-faced Alliance agent had offered less than a tenth of Noone's asking price.

The Empire was even worse. Sonax despised the Imperials from personal experience, so the others had had to assure her they were merely arranging a rendezvous with a local criminal syndicate. Meanwhile, Noone slipped out to negotiate with the Imperial consul-general of Kothlis. But Consul-General Halsek had tried a double-cross of his own, and they'd blasted out of port just ahead of 24 stormtroopers and a legion of planetary militia.

Which is why they'd ended up here, in Palisade. The modest island was dominated by the sprawling estate of Tyro Viveca, a hulking Krish business baron with a legendary reputation for eccentricities. More importantly, he had a passion for sport hunting, and in the past had dropped obscene sums for rare, antique, or cutting-edge weaponry. Now that they'd arrived, Kels wondered why they hadn't tried this avenue before. If you really want to jack up the price on something, she thought with a cruel grin, market it as a 'collectible.'

They entered the saltfish plaza, its stone floor slick with scales and guts. A boom of thunder rolled in from over the sea. The rain increased its staccato tempo, popping noisily against the awnings of the fishmonger tents. Kels wiped the rain away from her eyes with the heel of her hand, but Dawson seemed to be enjoying the shower.

"Hey, Kels?" queried Dawson.

"This is the way to the landing pads. You said we needed power couplings."

Kels patted her waist.

"Got 'em." When Dawson still looked puzzled, she pulled back the cloth to partially reveal one. "Ufted them from the Squib."

Dawson's face lit up.

"Do you have the Quay?"

"What?" frowned Kels.

"The Quay. Did you palm it?"

"Are you insane? Of course not. You were there. Besides, why would I?"

Dawson's shoulders slumped with sudden gloom and Kels rolled her eyes. Dawson had a childish tendency to fixate on trivialities, then abandon them without warning. He looked back through the haze of rain in the direction of the traders' marketplace, a pathetic lost-cub expression on his face.

Kels laughed and shook her head.

"Don't even think about it."

"A Gun of Command," Tyro Viveca breathed with wonder. "An actual working Hapan brain-scrambler."

"I see you're a man who knows his weapons," Noone remarked. "But in most eyewitness accounts Guns of Command are hand pistols. This, as you can see, is a full-sized rifle."

"Yesss..." said Viveca, hefting the firearm and taking a bead down the length of the barrel. He twisted his upper body, sighted on the stuffed head of a Bothan krak'jya, and tensed his index finger, stopping short of depressing the trigger fully.

"Boom," he whispered, and giggled.

He abruptly raised his head and regained his professional composure.

"Why is that?"

Noone was taken aback by the Krish's odd display, but didn't show it.

"My associates have determined that the rifle is a one-of-a-kind prototype from the Charubah Armaments Guild, packing twice the persuasive potency of their original product."

That was only slightly less than a total lie. The prototype angle had been Kels' best guess, and without a Hapan pistol to compare the rifle with, the double-strength claim was a brazen con.

"You're welcome to field-test it, of course."

"Thank you. I will. Rutt!"

In response to his master's bark, Viveca's Houk servant trundled sluggishly through the doorway. He stood ready at the far wall, piggish eyes downcast, beefy hands folded over his stomach. Viveca blew an amused snort through his flat nostrils.

"Hold still, Rutt. This won't hurt a bit."

The room exploded in an inferno of crackling blue sparks. Tendrils of electricity crawled across the Houk's body and dissipated in pulsing waves from his hands and feet. Rutt spasmed once, twice, then assumed a vacant, dead-eyed stance, limbs dangling limply at his sides. If he hadn't remained upright, Noone would have sworn he was dead. Viveca's eyes narrowed in pleasure.

"Rutt - kneel!"

The Houk dropped to both knees with a resounding thunk.

"Rutt - lay!"

The Houk pitched forward and impacted the wooden floor with his face. Noone winced.

"Rutt - howl!"

The Houk drew both arms under his body, threw his head back, and bayed louder than a pack of Corellian canoids. Noone wrinkled his nose with distaste and swallowed a deep draught of dun brandy.

Viveca laughed uproariously and lowered the Gun of Command.

"Splendid! How long does the trance last?"

Noone struggled to make himself heard over the servant's strangled braying.

"On him? No longer than forty minutes. A human will stay under for at least an hour, an Ugnought for two or three."

This, at least, was entirely true. During their first week of ownership, they'd tested the rifle on a wide variety of unsuspecting marks with impressive results.

Viveca grunted with satisfaction.

"Rutt - cease!"

The Houk halted in mid cry, though the afterecho continued to reverberate along the wine-colored walls.

"Let's get down to business, you and I. How much are you asking?"

Noone locked eyes with the Krish.

"One and a half million," he answered coolly. "But to honor your outstanding reputation I'll accept one point three in hard credits."

To Noone's surprise, Viveca didn't even blink. Instead, his eyes hardened and his voice took on an edge of tempered durasteel.

"Now let me make you an offer," he hissed in a threatening whisper. "I will take your Gun. I will give you zero credits, hard or otherwise. And if I am feeling charitable I might even give you a chance at saving your worthless hide."

The brandy went down the wrong pipe. Noone gagged violently and hammered his chest with his fist.

"Excuse me?" he choked out.

"And you will accept my offer because you are Cecil Noone, leader of an amateurish band of petty thieves who stole this item from a well-connected crimelord. You will accept because Guttu the Hutt and the heirs of Ritinki each have warrants out on your life. You will accept because you have no other choice."

The blood seemed to be draining from Noone's body and pooling in the soles of his feet. His mouth struggled to generate a rejoinder and failed.

"Did you really think," Viveca went on, "that you could come skipping into my receiving room under an assumed name and try to sell me the only known prototype of the Hapans' rifle variant? Either you vastly underestimate your own notoriety or you think I have the brains of a gravel-maggot. You're quite famous, Mr. Noone, at least among those who keep tabs on the bit players in organized crime. And fame has its price."

Noone had regained his wits.

"You're right, Viveca," he confessed, "you've got me pegged."

The Gun, it's all yours. But you know I'm of far more use to you alive, in more ways than you can count. You lose nothing by - "

"My offer," the Krish cut him off, "my only offer, is this. I will let you leave my manor with the clothes on your back and the trinkets in your pockets. If you make it to the edge of my hunting grounds, you are free to raise ship and leave Kabal forever. But I am a seasoned tracker and an excellent shot. I seldom lose any quarry - certainly not one as foolish and guileless as yourself."

Guileless! Noone thought. He certainly knows how to get under my skin.

"You can't be serious," he said aloud, his voice rising with real anger.

"You're proposing to hunt me down like a twelve-point quivry for the game of it."

"Oh, but I am serious, Mr. Noone." Viveca looked delighted. "Deadly serious. You will soon learn - "

"No, Viveca, you didn't catch my meaning. I said you can't be serious. You think it's a fresh idea? An over-moneyed nutcase sets up a murder and calls it sport. I've seen it played out a hundred times in the flashy halo-thrillers."

The Krish's lips parted in an angry sneer, revealing interlocking rows of pearly daggers.

"I hope you were taking notes," he spat. "Rutt!"

The Houk stirred from his prone position on the floor and moved to stand by his master. Viveca nodded at Noone.

"Grab him by the collar."

Shuffling zombielike over to Noone's position, the towering alien squeezed the neck of Noone's shirt with one oversized meathook. The fabric stretched, the seam ripped, and the concealed emergency comlink was crushed to powder.

"You will not be calling anyone. You are entirely on your own. At least try to make it an amusing hunt."

Viveca leaned back and carefully studied Noone's face.

"For verification, Guttu will want your head. Ritinki's heirs will settle for your arms for the fingerprints and pore patterns. Those legs will feed my nashtah. Your torso...well, that will likely be vaporized with the first hit from my Kell Mark II. I'm terribly sorry Mr. Noone, but only the finest specimens are kept intact for my trophy room."

Time's running out, thought Noone. If I'm going to make a move, it's got to be now.

"Rutt!" Noone shouted, pointing his finger at Viveca. "Kill him!"

Still under the influence of the Gun of Command, the Houk manservant lunged at his master with a feral moan-simultaneously, Noone vaulted a divan and dashed toward the wall display of vintage weapons. With a supple grace belying his bulk, Viveca moved one step out of Rutt's path, allowing the slight

movement to add momentum to the sudden pivot of his upper body and the piston strength of his long arms. With a grunt, he brought the butt of the Hapan rifle squarely down on the nerve cluster at the base of Rutt's skull. The enormous Houk went down like a wet sack of bantha feed.

Noone reached the rack, yanked loose something resembling a crossbow, and spun around to take aim at Viveca. He then realized two things: The Krish already had him covered, and the crossbow wasn't loaded.

"Perhaps this will be enjoyable after all," Viveca smiled. "I suggest you start running."

Soaked with sweat, Kels disappeared into the shadow of the formidably armed luxury yacht berthed at Docking Pad P13. When they'd stolen the ship from a gangster, it had been known as the Amari Wind. In the month since, it had quickly run through Hieroglyph, Tailchaser, and Voona 's Dream II. Currently the transponder identified it as the pleasure boat Spiraling Shape.

Kels clomped up the entry ramp and eased a satchel off one shoulder. A glance at the swollen clouds assured her another shower was imminent, and she rapidly punched today's keycode into the lock controlling the access hatch. The lock deliberated a moment, accepted the new numbers, and rolled the portal open with a hydraulic whine.

A billow of cool, dry air washed across her face as she stepped inside, but she winced at a tenacious stench reminiscent of putrefying groat cheese. Despite days of oxy recycling, they'd been unable to remove the last traces of Kothlis' peculiar atmosphere from the main cabin's air supply. Kels strode to the far wall and punched the vent fans up to full.

Sonax looked up from her spot at the tech station.

"What took ssso long?" she hissed over the roar of the fans. A Sluissi, she possessed a sinuous serpentine tail in place of legs. Her BioTech AY6 cyborg headband also made her a capable computer slicer.

"And where isss Dawson?"

"Nice to see you too, Sunshine," Kels quipped, flopping into an acceleration couch. "You know, do you come in any other style besides 'irked and bothered?'"

"Look who iss talking," Sonax muttered as she slithered to the wall and tapped the fans back down to their original setting. "We have a problem."

The hatch whirred open once more and Dawson padded into the cabin, panting.

"Gah!" he exclaimed as he sniffed the air with his damp black nose. "We didn't get rid of that yet?"

"What took you?" Kels asked. "I though tyou were right behind me."

Dawson paused.

"I picked up a sack of maraffa twigs." He fumbled through one duffel and removed a bundle of thin sticks packed in an oil-stained paper bag.

"See?" he declared, holding the white sack up for inspection. He shook loose one of the smooth twigs as he crossed the room and turned the fans up to maximum. Sonax threw up both hands with irritation.

"Lisstten, both of you," she announced. "Noone was due to check in thirty minutesss ago. According to my receiver, his com link isn't jussst inactive - it's been dessstroyed."

"Destroyed?" Kels echoed with alarm.

"Jussst so. Ye tl do not think he is dead. I am monitoring the estate's EM emissions. Viveca has activated his hunting grounds and placed perimeter defenses on ssstandby. I sussspect the deal went bad and Noone made the poor decision to escape on foot. If he is sstill alive, he will not be for long."

Kels cursed.

"The fool. Hoofing it through the forest with a famous hunter trying to take him down. Noone better still have the Gun, or a rescue won't be worth our time."

Dawson, leaning against the bulkhead, appeared to be deep in thought.

"Here's what we should do," he suggested, biting the tip off the maraffa twig with his long incisors and sucking out a dollop of sticky orange sap. "Power up the weapons and take the ship in high, parking it just above the manor - "

"Negative," Sonax interrupted. "Viveca iss a paranoid. The 'perimeter defenses' I mentioned consist of two automated turbolaserssss and a miniaturized energy ssshield. Lf we do anything, it has got to be sssneaky. "

Kels closed her eyes and sighed through gritted teeth.

"Well, that is what thieves do best."

Noone crashed through a bramble thicket, wet branches slapping his face. A steep slope loomed through the bracken; he misjudged his footing and skidded halfway down the muddy bank before breaking his fall against the thick bole of an arboray tree. Shaken, he rested for a moment, chest heaving, head down between his knees.

Viveca's property was divided into distinct terrain zones. Upon leaving the estate Noone had plowed through an interminable stretch of grassland before reaching the relative cover of this deciduous forest. His path thus far was an approximate straight line from the mansion to the nearest edge of the hunting grounds, a length he'd studied on a public map the previous evening and estimated at fifteen kilometers.

The shortest distance was guaranteed to be the most perilous distance, and would undoubtedly be the first place Viveca would come looking for him. But Noone knew when he was playing with a stacked deck. He wasn't about to play hide and seek on the enemy's home turf, and besides, if the Krish was on his way...

Maybe he could do a little card-shifting of his own.

Noone hadn't been boasting back in the game hall - he had seen this scenario before, in countless permutations from hackjob holoflicks to

beautifully operatic Rodian dramas. And in every version, he reassured himself, the pursued successfully turned the tables on his pursuer.

Well, Noone remembered with a swallow, not in the Rodian plays...

He knew just what he had to do. Viveca might possess the finest beast-blasters money could buy, but Noone wagered the "seasoned tracker" drive had been half bluff and half bravado. In fact, he chuckled, when the chips were down the Krish probably had the survival skills of an adolescent nature scout. With new confidence, Noone removed his multitool - the only useful item still on his person - and bent back a tree's firm green branch, testing its springiness and tension.

Never done this before, but how hard can it be? He scanned the snarled undergrowth for a fallen limb and unearthed a solid knot of hardwood, dead but not rotten. Flicking the stud that activated the vibro-edge on the multitool's main blade, he carved the knot into six pieces of roughly equal size. Picking up the first segment, he whittled it down to a sharp point.

The multitool made short work of the task at hand, and Noone began lashing each skewer to the end of the branch with sinewy stalks of cordgrass. Guileless, he said! I'll ram six chunks of pointed guile right down his fat throat.

The muddy slope would be perfect - Viveca would be watching his feet and wouldn't notice the trap until it was too late. Noone secured the last stake with a double hitch. Surveying the area with a satisfied sigh, he looped a length of cordgrass around his right arm, grasped the spike-studded tree limb, and bent it back away from the hill at nearly a ninety-degree angle. Holding the quivering bough with his left hand, he tried to shake the cordgrass loose from his bicep and failed. Switching tactics, he grabbed the rough bark in his right hand, reached for the cord with his left - and was knocked flat on his back as the branch whipped forward, glanced against his shoulder, and disappeared behind him with a scream of torn air.

Lying on the embankment, Noone blinked up stupidly at the mottled gray sky. That's not good. Struggling to a sitting position, he looked behind him to discover the limb was cracked, dangling limply by a light twist of fibers. Three of the six spikes were gone. Slag it! I don't have time to make another one!

Then he noticed the blood.

The three missing spikes hadn't gone far at all - they were firmly impaled in his left shoulder. Now this, Noone thought, gritting his teeth, this is much worse. With an agonized cry audible through clamped lips, he wrenched the points loose and staggered weakly to his feet. Okay Junior Woodsman, you just blew your one chance. Clapping his right hand over the wound to staunch the dark flow, Noone jogged off into the thickening trees.

BRZZZZT! Kels rapped her comlink against the hard metal frame of the data pad with equal measures of frustration and desperation.

"Try it again, Sonax."

Through the hissing and sputtering of her fritzing audio pickup came a faint, faraway voice: "Tessst..."

Kels pursed her lips.

"Now would be a great time to knock off the sibilants. I can hardly tell what's you and what's the static. Dawson!" she called back over her shoulder.

"Kick it into gear, would you?"

The Tynnan trotted up to join her, two lumpy duffels slung about his neck and one hold-out blaster strapped to his leg. Kels had insisted that he carry a sidearm for their foray into Viveca's turf, even though Dawson's mastery of lethal devices was limited to explosives containing unpronounceable chemical compounds.

Her boot sank into a shallow peat bog and she pulled it free with a wet sucking gurgle. They'd chosen the shortest stretch of territory - fifteen clicks from the edge to the mansion - but the outer terrain zone was a sodden, brackish, rot-stinking swamp. Her hand cleaved a path through a cobweb barricade strung between two stunted trees and a dark shadow scurried out of sight. The stagnant waters were crawling with furry gray spiders about the size of her hand. She hoped they weren't poisonous.

Kels glanced at the screen of her datapad - still blank.

"Sonax," she called into the comlink, "where's that location fix?"

"Working on it," came the distant reply. "Viveca owns a Rodian HT training sssystem - it has sssix independently-controlled repulsorlift drones that are used as targets in tracking exercises. He has ordered them to hunt down Noone and make sssure he remains in the field of play."

"Any good news?"

"I think I can ssslice into the drones' live data feed. When they know where Noone iss, I'll know where he iss, meaning you'll know where he iss."

"Dandy," Kels remarked. "Let us know when you've struck crystalline." She thumbed off the comlink. "Dawson, do you think you could - "

"PORTENTS VAGUE, ASK AGAIN LATER."

Kels had her gun in her hand in an instant and dropped into a fighting crouch, holding the weapon steady on the source of the unfamiliar voice. The next moment she lowered her arm, got to her feet, and exploded.

"What in space do you think you're doing? I could have blown a flaming crater right through your tiny speck of a brain!"

Dawson poked his head out from behind the Quay, which he'd thrust out in front of him as an ineffectual shield.

"Hey, what's with the hair trigger, here?" he shouted with anger born of fear. "I was just fiddling with it!"

Kels holstered her blaster with a growl.

"Now you know why I tossed that thing back in the market. Don't tell me you bought another one."

Dawson shook his head.

"It's the same Quay," he sniffed, patting down his ruffled fur.

"I got it back from the Squib for three blasting caps and a copper spindle."

"And you could have stolen it for nothing," she countered. "You've got to learn the value of a credit if you want to win in this business."

The comlink buzzed.

"That's Sonax. Put that thing away if you don't want to fish it out of a bog."

She switched on the speaker and caught Sonax in mid-sentence. " - broken into the visssual data feed of one drone. It isss a passive link only - I cannot influence the drone's flight path. Ssstandby."

Kels whistled with surprise.

"Not bad. Let's hold this position. Looks like we might get lucky and save ourselves a lot of pointless legwork."

The intermittent bubbling of the soggy mire seemed to grow louder in the sudden stillness. A few of the largest water-spiders hopped closer, broad footpads supporting their weight atop the swamp's grimy film. A sweeping splash from Kels' foot sent them scattering into the tangled shadows beneath the trees' shadowy roots. Dawson tapped his short claws rhythmically against the metal clasp of his satchel strap and stared absently into the vaporous mist. After several minutes passed without incident, the abrupt crackle of the active comlink made them both jump.

"Kelsss..."

"I'm here. What've you got?"

"The drone hasss picked up two targets - a human and an alien - and is moving to intercept."

"A human and an alien," Kels repeated, looking hopefully at Dawson. "That's gotta be Noone and the Krish. Where are they?"

"They cannot be far from your current position. The drone is accelerating and powering up its blaster. It is currently less than three hundred meters to the northeast."

"Three hundred?" Dawson said, surprised.

"Why, that's practically nothing. We can be there in a flash."

"Hold on...it's two hundred." Kels and Dawson glanced at each other, puzzled.

"Or less than two hundred," Sonax continued. "More like one-fifty. No, wait. Use one-twenty. Ninety. Sixty. Thirty. Oh, ssskrank-"

The bullet-bodied HT drone burst into the clearing amid a shower of loose leaves, firing madly as it raced through its initial pass. Kels instinctively dived head-first toward the mud, drawing her blaster as she fell and managing to snap off a few shots in the direction of the silver-plated killer, all of which went wide. The drone's furious spray of scarlet energy converged on Dawson. Several bolts impacted one of the satchels slung over his chest, burning three dark holes in the canvas and sending the Tynnan skidding through the water and into a fen-rotted log with a wet crunch. The drone continued its flight through the clearing, disappearing into the mist at the far side.

Kels, face down in the sludge, could still hear the whine of its compact repulsorlift as she pulled herself into a crouch. The sound faded, but shrieked suddenly as the high-boost engine came back online for round two. Kels spared a quick glance over at Dawson - not moving - and brought her blaster to bear as the machine zipped back into view. The drone spat red darts at her position and she squeezed the trigger. Her weapon wheezed and dislodged a glob of doughy clay.

Crying out in frustration, Kels kicked both feet with frantic strength, launching herself backward as a volley of bolts sizzled into the watery murk where she had been crouching a moment before. She readied her arm to throw her useless blaster at the oncoming hunter, knowing it would buy her little more than a second.

An unexpected shot erupted from the side, burning past her ear. Dawson stood unsteadily on both feet, clutching his blaster pistol in both paws

and discharging a sloppy spray of fire that wasn't even close to its target. The drone made a few simple attitude jigs in its flight, spinning into a tight barrel roll and easily avoiding the clumsy threat. Once again its course took it to the edge of the clearing and it disappeared behind the gray curtain.

Dawson blinked frantically in a vain attempt to clear his head. His chest flashed with stabbing pain as he sucked in a shredded breath. Cocking his ears - for his treacherous vision appeared to be serving up doubles of everything - Dawson shakily held the blaster on the approximate point where he guessed the HT drone would reappear. The weapon was much heavier than he'd remembered, and seemed to deliver more of a kick, too. He deployed his thick tail behind himself as a brace.

Once more the drone tore through the treeline, at a higher angle this time, not at all where Dawson was aiming. His panicked answering shot, however, was so woefully off-target that it nearly succeeded in grazing the droid's durasteel casing through perverse luck alone. The tracker unit plunged to evade the salvo, getting off a few potshots of its own as Dawson poured more awkward fire in the direction of the destroyer. If it had been equipped with a vocabulator, the drone would have issued a contemptuous snort as it launched into a nimble zigzag and lined up a shot that would bore a hole in the Tynnan's left eye socket. Its starboard maneuvering jet hissed as the droid lurched in for the kill.

With an inarticulate scream, Kels swung her scavenged stick like a smashball mallet. The droid's sensor-studded nose impacted the flattest surface of the knotty branch with a force of 20 kilograms per square centimeter. With an agonized electronic squeal audible even above the reverberating CLANG of rattled metal, the HT drone sailed back the way it had come in a graceful ten-meter arc. The weak splashdown seemed rather vulgar by comparison.

Gasping, Kels approached Dawson, pulled the blaster from his unprotesting fingers, and strode over to the spot where the silver droid lay twitching in the mire. Its servos whined as it madly flailed its limbs in an attempt to right itself. Kels made an adjustment to the blaster's power setting, took deliberate aim at her target, and blasted the drone to superheated shrapnel at point-blank range.

She looked back at her companion.

"You're welcome, by the way," she managed, panting. "What's the damage?"

Dawson poked his head inside his newly-perforated satchel and let out a horrified squeal.

"Oh Fates! This is awful!"

"I didn't mean the bag, I meant you. I thought the drone had punctured you for sure." She walked up to Dawson and reached behind the ruined neck satchel, carefully running her fingers through his chest fur. The Tynnan cheeped with pain and pulled his face from the sack.

"Take it easy!" Kels nodded. "Bruised ribs. I'd guess these lower two are broken. The fur's burnt away here, here, and here. If it weren't for that satchel, you'd be breathing through your ribcage."

"But look!" Dawson wailed, holding out the sack. "One bolt fused the comp-timer and another popped the ionizer! These were all my triggers and detonators, and now they're circuit wiped!"

"That's all your detonators? What's in the other sack?"

"Putty, thermite gel, shaped detonite, raw baradium, a few vials of nergon, all the explosives. But I can't set 'em off without an electronic trigger!"

Kels snorted as she broke open a field medkit and peeled the protective backing from a strip of synthflesh.

"You're not good for much then, are you? Maybe if another HT drone shows up you can catch it in that sack, tie off the end, and bring it back to the ship as a pet."

She handed the synthflesh to Dawson, who grudgingly took it. Both thieves headed back into the thick of the swamp to continue their search-and-rescue.

"Dawson - by any chance, did those laser blasts slag the Great and Powerful Quay?"

"Nope. It's in the other bag."

"Stang."

Rocks. First grassland, then forest, now a vast tumble of ruddy boulders, some the size of a cargo freighter. Scrub vegetation peeked out between the sheltered cracks and occasionally a hardshelled arthropod flashed from a tiny bore-hole. Noone had long since given up estimating how much money it would take to terraform a region to such a degree. One point three million was loose change, he fumed. The cheapskate.

The makeshift bandages wrapped around his shoulder, hastily crafted from the ragged strips of his jacket sleeves, were black with encrusted blood. His boot soles scraped against the stony surface as he tried to summit a gargantuan slab, a task made all the more difficult with only a single functional arm.

Noone reached the zenith, looked down at a sheer three-meter drop, and jumped. He hit the surface and a chuff of air involuntarily escaped his lips. Strangely, the ground looked artificially smooth and sounded hollow. Noone advanced several paces, saw another, shorter drop, and hopped down.

He'd been standing on a cage. The solid durasteel sheets composing the rear and sides were partially buried, but the front-a wide panel of tightly meshed squares was fully exposed. Realizing he had to keep moving but curious in spite of himself, Noone placed his face up to the grid and peered inside.

Something slammed against the door with a crash and a sizzle. Terrified, Noone took a step backward, tripped on a stone, and landed flat on his backside. The thing retreated into the darkness at the rear of the box as angry yellow sparks played across the surface of the mesh.

A force cage. Designed to deliver an incapacitating stun shock to any prisoner who attempted escape. Noone had seen plenty of them throughout his lifetime and had even been locked inside one during a disastrous early burglary. The standard factory installed locks were fairly easy to defeat.

He stood and placed one hand safely against the interlacing bars. The shock charge in a force cage was projected across the interior surface only. The

caged beast stirred and turned its head-if one could call it a head-in his direction.

It was a lamproid. The other lamproid, Noone reminded himself, the female that Viveca was arrogantly saving for future vengence. The primitive creature was utterly hideous, a parasitic intestinal worm that nature had insanely blessed with a colossal frame and a predator's instincts. Its oily gray skin was blemished with crosshatched electrical burns. The floor of the narrow enclosure swam with fetid animal waste, blood, and bile.

The lamproid drew its barbed face up to the mesh, across from Noone's palm. The metallic grid began to hum dangerously but the creature stopped short of the crippling stun field. A tiny wet filament curled from between two yellowed fangs and quivered in the air as if sampling Noone's scent. Abruptly the appendage retracted. The beast reared back and seemed to take careful stock of its visitor.

A bothersome itch attacked the nape of Noone's neck. He raised his good arm to scratch until he realized the tickle was emanating from inside his skull. The creeping sensation slowly spread across the top half of his brain as if probing for a way inside. He stared back at the lamproid, fascinated. Telepathy, or something else?

The tingling grew stronger, more insistent, until it felt as if a flapping moon moth had crawled in his ear and become trapped in his cranium. An instant later, twin streaks of warmth shot from the top of his spine and the fingertips of his left hand. Both streams followed bone and converged at his shoulder, generating a hot glow that made a slow turn around the injured joint. Noone was dimly aware of his pulse pounding.

The alien perception gently withdrew, and with it went most of Noone's pain. Astonished, he held up his arm and made a fist. Fresh blood oozed from the puncture wounds and glistened on the soiled bandages.

Oops. That didn't heal it, just made it easier to bear. He pressed down on the dressings and looked back at his benefactor.

"Uh., thanks. Thank you."

The lamproid didn't move. Noone felt an uncomfortable pressure behind his eyes, like the onset of a sinus headache. Words leapt unbidden to his tongue.

"You have to get out of there."

More pressure.

"I will open this door:'

A gentle yank carried Noone over to the lock. His consciousness watched from a faraway place as his hands fumbled with his multitool and extended the hole punch. Child's play. A simple jig in the input slot disabled the stun field; a thrust-and-lift unlatched the bolt. The door swung open with a squeak.

Still unsure what had just transpired, Noone watched as the lamproid vanished into the undergrowth. The nashtah strained at the leash. Its six taloned paws dug eagerly at the moist soil as it snuffled a heap of fallen leaves. Picking up the scent, the animal raised its chunky head and bayed with perfect joy. The howl cut off in a strangled urf as Viveca jerked on the taut lead.

"Heel!" he barked.

The forest zone had ended. Ahead of them, in an abrupt, obviously unnatural division, stretched the boulder zone. Thousands of titanic rocks lay piled in a vast jumble, some stacked atop one another like children's building blocks, others scattered randomly as if dropped from orbit. The hunt would be more difficult from here, but only slightly. Viveca doubted his prey had the sense to seek out the underground cave networks he had modeled after Trammic mome warrens, even though the entrances were obvious and they offered excellent cover. No, Noone would surely keep to the same straight-line path he'd followed thus far. It was a pity his landscape contractor hadn't gotten around to installing the spewing lava spouts.

Viveca wrapped the nashtah's leash around his left wrist and transferred his heavy blaster rifle to the same hand. Wordlessly, he held out his empty palm. Rutt, the Houk manservant, removed a datapad-sized tracking device from his overstuffed equipment pack and handed it to his master.

The Rodian Hunter-Trainer drone system was proving a major disappointment. Viveca tapped a command into the device and read the scrolling data. Two of the droids had found nothing, one had returned to the manor to fix its faulty repulsorlift engine, one was stuck in a stranglethorn patch not more than a klick from here, and the last - well, that one appeared to have vanished entirely. He would certainly have words with his Rodian arms dealer when they next crossed paths.

Sometimes, the Krish decided, it was impossible to beat a trained Dravian hound, a loyal porter, and an afternoon of fresh air. The old ways were still the best.

Still glancing at the drones' status report, Viveca shook the nashtah's leash and clicked his tongue. The animal leapt up and jubilantly pulled forward, clambering over the first column of stones. Viveca smiled. It was often difficult to follow a scent over rocky terrain, but Noone had been leaking blood ever since the onset of the forest tract. A spiked branch! Oh, it was rich. For someone to assume he would be taken in by such a prank was laughable; for the trap to backfire on such a person was hilarious. The final confrontation would be a delight. Well, Mr. Noone, it appears the hunt is at an end...much like your life. No, he wanted something snappy, something memorable. A merry chase, Mr. Noone, but -

A dark twist erupted from the rocks ahead and shot forward with a sonic crack. Faster than the eye could follow, the attenuated blur launched itself at Rutt, who was standing directly in its path. In the same instant a loop of tight coils swung toward the startled nashtah like a hangman's noose.

Viveca's breath seized in his throat and he let the datascreen fall from his fingers. One end of the indistinct attacker reached Rutt's chest and kept moving in a clean surgical stab through multiple layers of bone and cartilage. A barbed tail emerged from the center of the field backpack fleshed wetly in the light, and withdrew before Rutt's reflexes could mount a response. The Houk's hands went belatedly to the hole in his heart and his knees buckled.

Viveca shifted his blaster rifle to his right hand and started to bring the nose up.

The furious tangle wrapped around the nashtah and exploded outward, snapping the leash and propelling the yipping hound into the air. A severed leg

spun crazily toward the treeline. Viveca brought the weapon to bear and readied a shot. With a boiling hiss, the creature fell upon him. Heaving rings of flesh enveloped the Krish with lightning speed and pitiless strength. The monster looped around his torso - pinning his gun arm - and brought its razor-toothed mouth forward in a predatory death strike. Viveca's left hand shot up and intercepted the demon's head just centimeters from the soft folds of his jugular area.

The two stood locked in a silent combat of wills. Viveca's fingers dug into the beast's hot skin while its coils shifted and flowed along his body. The vicehold on his blaster faltered and the Krish nearly yanked his weapon free. In response, the muscular rings clamped down and tightened their suffocating grip. The nightmare face drew closer, its rings of shredder teeth churning, and a quivering drop of clouded venom beaded at the tip of one fang. Viveca's arm shuddered with exertion. Letting loose a tormented grunt, Viveca budged the laser cannon one centimeter, then another. The serpentine horror constricted still further. The blaster continued to work loose in tiny jerks. Viveca felt an unbearable pressure building inside his skull. With a final, agonized wrench, the Mark II came free. Realizing its sudden peril, the beast loosened its coils and brought its tail stinger back for an eviscerating swipe at its enemy's belly.

Something popped inside Viveca's brain and a trickle of blood ran from his nostril. His grip didn't slacken. Viveca placed the rifle's wide barrel against the creature's chin and fired. A roar of energy immolated the organic chunk and streaked up to the sky as a pillar of flame. The headless corpse went limp and Viveca dropped it to the ground. A pathetic finger of smoke wafted up from the ash-cauterized stump that had once been a neck. Disgusted, Viveca kicked the lamproid's motionless remains. The struggle had cost him a trophy head. From somewhere behind the nearest cluster of stone blocks the nashtah growled and barked with pain.

Rutt lay facedown in the gravel and, by the looks of the exit wound, would never stir again.

A manservant dead, a hound crippled, a lamproid wasted, and a perfectly splendid afternoon spoiled. Viveca's eyes smoldered.

Noone had a great deal to answer for. Whatever magic elixir the lamproid had willed into his shoulder had a pretty weak duration time. Or

perhaps the numbing effect lessened with distance. Either way, the joint was throbbing as painfully as ever when Noone entered the jungle zone.

Bambooi reeds sprouted from the spongy soil in close bundles often or more. Other stalks, apparently a different breed, had diameters in excess of sixty centimeters at the base and spread into four tapering branches as they fought for the sky. The thicket stretched several meters above his head and swayed slightly as a breeze rustled the trembling clusters of starburst leaves. In some spots, the shoots grew so closely together that forward passage was impossible. Noone weaved through the gaps wherever they appeared and kept one eye on the position of the sun. He was forced to double back on his course four times in the first twenty minutes and was much relieved when, after a frustrating fifth dead end, he stumbled across what looked like a trail.

The path, little more than a meter wide, ran in a relative straight line directly on the heading he needed to follow. Amazed at his good fortune, Noone broke into a weary jog.

A sudden thought brought him up short. Why was there a trail here? It was far too clean to be a natural result of the bambooi's growth pattern. Since Viveca had engineered his hunting grounds to his personal specifications, he must also have designed this trail. And Viveca wasn't the type to make things easy for his playthings.

Cautiously, Noone crept forward, scanning the ground and the shoots on each side for anything that looked out of place. After he'd gone a short distance without incident, the path abruptly doubled in width. He stopped before a small circular clearing. The path continued on its opposite edge. The perfect spot for a booby trap. The soil at the edge of the clearing looked rough and disturbed, and the dead reeds piled at the center appeared to have been cut with a vibroblade.

Though Noone had never encountered one in life, every child who'd ever read an adventure serial was familiar with a Ralltiir tiger pit.

Noone chuckled. He, at least, was no fool. Backtracking several paces, he began searching for a gap in the reed clusters that would allow him to bypass the entire clearing. Moving quickly - for perhaps the covered pit was designed to slow him down as much as catch him - he squeezed between two stalks and picked his way forward.

Considering he'd left the main thoroughfare, the way was surprisingly easy going. It almost seemed as if he'd found an overgrown game run. The thought didn't reassure him, and he considered striking back for the main path. He should be past the trap by now...

One step brought him up to the edge of a tiny pocket clearing; the second step carried him inside it before he could stop himself. Immediately, an invisible hand yanked him to the flat ground with such savagery his teeth shoveled a spray of dirt down the back of his throat.

What happened? Noone raised his head, spat out the gritty mouthful, and came to the sickening realization that he couldn't move the rest of his body. He'd been paralyzed. The impact had ruptured his spinal column.

Hold on, Noone reminded himself. No need to panic. His bleak diagnosis must be flawed, since he could clearly see his fingers twitching. He swept both forearms back and forth across the soil then wiggled his feet experimentally. A distant rustle answered him.

Not paralysis, then. But something was pinning his thighs and torso to the ground with an inhuman strength. It felt as if an industrial freight hauler had parked on his back.

With a groan, he realized the truth. A man trap. A one-meter square metal slab rigged with gravfield generators. Unlike standard repulsorlifts, which pushed against a planet's mass and allowed landspeeders to float, grav generators intensified the local gravity by a factor of eight. Once seized by a man trap, not even a Wookiee could fight his way free.

But it couldn't hurt to try. A sustained push with his palms gained him nothing and brought about further agony in his injured left arm. Inexplicably, the relatively minor effort left him unable to draw a breath. Noone quickly tried to remember everything he'd heard or read about man traps.

The news wasn't encouraging. Though advertised as a safe, non-lethal way to subdue a fleeing target, the Ubrikkian R-TechApp model had a number of detrimental side effects. Once pinned, a victim's lungs struggled to expand under conditions they were never designed to handle. The pumping of a heart became a laborious task to stave off cardiac arrest. Vital fluids toiled through

grav-compressed passages and could burst under the strain. Eventually blood would begin to puddle in abdominal organs and the brain would shut down from lack of oxygen. Any bounty hunter who left a man trap unattended would return to find a dead mark.

Not very sporting, is it? Noone wondered if Viveca's love for bloodsport would be satisfied by a finding a helpless victim choking on his own bile. He doubted it would, and that bothered him. Of course, like the tiger pit, Viveca's fun might lie in discovering whether Noone could avoid the trap in the first place. He hadn't. The hunt was over.

Or was it? Was this another test of wits? Noone twisted his neck and scanned the brush. The Ubrikkian R-TechApp came with a remote activator and a 10-meter activation cord. It had to be close, and - there!

To his left, wedged between a crowd of slender reeds just under two meters distant, glinted the silver plasteel of the remote activator. Its surprising proximity both puzzled and reassured Noone. Viveca could have buried the device well over the next rise. Instead, he'd placed it here - in sight and out of reach.

The activation cable was likely plugged in to the closest corner. Noone's left hand scrabbled along the trap's smooth edge and located the attachment socket. A yank on the cord pulled it free from the shallow layer of dirt that had hidden it and caused the activator to slide forward a centimeter or two.

The activation cord and grav plate were firmly bolted together. Noone knew he'd never separate them without a set of tools, but tried anyway without success.

He pulled on the cord to bring the activator closer but the device was blocked behind a tangle of reeds. Breaking the cable was out of the question.

A breeze swept through the clearing, cooling his sweat-stained face and bringing with it a sound that chilled him even further. The distant baying of Viveca's nashtah.

Think, think! His multitool, tucked away in a pants pocket, might as well be on the dark side of Kabal's moon. He couldn't drag the activator into his grasp. Could he extend something over to the activator?

He scanned the ground again. No rocks, no wires, no spools of fibercord. Around him, the bamboo shoots were the thickness of tree trunks. Except, that is, for the underbrush. Stretching out his arm with a groan, Noone closed his right hand around a clump of tiny seedlings and pulled them out by the roots.

The effort triggered an explosion of suffering in his chest and he squeezed his eyes shut until the agony subsided. His heart palpitated in weak shivering flutters.

Each stem was as long as his forearm, as wide as his finger, and slightly tapered near the tip. What's more, each was hollow and surprisingly rigid. Noone broke the root segment off one plant and fitted the remainder onto the top of a second stem. The double-length pointer felt light in his hands and showed no sign of bending.

He added two more shoots, then stretched out to pluck more. Fireworks popped behind his eyes. He tried to swallow but couldn't, and fluid leaked from his mouth. Another stalk painstakingly joined the interlocking pole.

His legs, at the point where his knees left the grav plate, felt as if some fiend were amputating them with a plasma torch. Similar lines of fire burned across his upper chest.

With a start, Noone realized that the man trap was actually keeping blood away from his punctured shoulder. If the wound had fallen inside the grav field when he'd been pulled to the ground, he would already have hemorrhaged to death.

One final stem. With quaking hands, Noone lifted the swaying two-meter stick. In one of the small miracles that sometimes befall career gamblers, it didn't break.

He shakily guided the prod toward the activator. As he tried to steady its path, dark blotches appeared at the edges of his vision, a shrill screech rang in his ears, and his pain eased tremendously, which terrified him most of all. It meant he was mere moments from unconsciousness.

The stick stretched out toward the intensity control on top of the activator. If he could dial it down to two or three gees, he should be able to roll off the grav plate. The sun suddenly went dark.

Concentrate, please concentrate, he willed himself. It's just you and the branch, the branch and the dial. Nothing else matters. The bambooi tip clanged uselessly off the base of the activator. Noone pulled it back for another try. Wobbling with tension, the pointer brushed delicately against plasteel.

A furred, mud-encrusted foot stomped down and snapped the rod cleanly in two.

Noone blinked and a shape swam into focus.

"Dawson!" he roared, infuriated. "You broke my stick!"

The Tynnan looked down at his feet, opened his mouth in a silent "O" of surprise, and said something muffled and distant. Noone could no longer hear anything save the thundering of blood through his eardrums. An indistinct pale figure moved behind Dawson and pointed a blaster, and the activator vanished in a soundless flash of light.

Blessed relief inundated his flattened body and he willingly slipped into oblivion.

Noone came to with a spastic twitch and an involuntary gasp. His hands slapped at his face as he batted away the small vial Kels held beneath his nose.

"Enough!" he croaked. "What is that stuff?"

Kels shrugged.

"Chemical smelling salts, looks like. From the medkit. We've got to keep moving if we want to stay ahead of your friend, and I'm not about drag you."

"You might have to," Noone said gravely. "That grav field did a number on everything except my hairstyle." He looked back at the deactivated man trap. "How did you find me?"

"Take the shortest distance and run it in a beeline, that looked to be about your style. We had our own adventures along the way."

Noone looked around.

"Where'd Dawson go?"

"He's hoping he can set up an ambush, but his explosives are useless without a detonator. Noone - what happened to the Gun of Command?"

"Kid, if I still had the Gun, Viveca would be here right now massaging my toes. I doubt we'll ever see it again."

Cold fury was evident in the set of her eyes, though she bit back the angry retort that formed in her brain.

"I see," she managed instead, her voice icy.

Noone watched her carefully. There was a chance they could eventually recover the weapon if Viveca put it back into circulation on the arms market. They could even put together a plan for robbing the manor. But there was no sense going into detail when a more pressing concern was headed their way.

"We'd better make tracks," Kels finally conceded, consulting her datapad. "Sonax made a rough estimate of the Krish's position by tracing a drone signal back to his handheld transmitter. He's less than ten minutes away."

Noone groaned as his young accomplice helped him to his feet. Somehow, he'd have to find a bacta tank.

Dawson emerged from the dense thicket a bit farther up the trail.

"Let's move," he announced. "It's unstable, but it's the best I could do since somebody slagged the circuits in the man trap."

"What did you - "

"C'mon! This thing's motion-sensitive and I don't know how long it'll last!"

"Dawson - "

"Go! Go! Go!" The Tynnan broke into a run.

Tyro Viveca strode purposely forward, a creature of pure rage. That preposterous human had humiliated him, robbed him of a valued servant, and nearly gotten him killed. And the irony was that, without a doubt, the little dunce had no idea what he had truly done.

An intelligent opponent would have formulated a plan for turning the lamproid against his pursuer; Noone had just opened the door and uncorked a bottle of random lightning. Viveca spat at the ground with manifest contempt. That Noone hadn't been killed himself was a miracle, and Viveca had no tolerance for "lucky" dunces. Each footfall took him one step closer to his rightful prize.

The nashtah sniffed the ground around the bambooi stalks. Though its leash had been ruined in the attack and subsequently discarded, the loss of its middle right leg seemed to have cured the beast of its overanxious tendency to run ahead. Dravian hounds were known for their rugged constitutions and this one had recovered from its partial dismemberment in minutes. Before it would continue, however, the animal had viciously disemboweled the six-meter carcass of its attacker. Despite the wasted seconds, Viveca had allowed it. He could think of no aesthetic use for lamproid skin without ahead to accompany it.

The limping nashtah followed the scent onto the main trail. Viveca smiled. Had his prey fallen into the tiger pit? It would be delicious to see Noone impaled on a bed of vibro-stakes, but Viveca rather hoped the human had landed safely and pulled loose one of the spikes to use as a hand weapon. He pictured himself snatching the spike out of his opponent's hands, then gutting his astonished foe from belly to neck.

Surprisingly, however, the scent quickly led off the track and back into the thicket. The nashtah disappeared among the stalks and Viveca followed with measured steps. This could be even more delightful, he thought, as he recognized the overgrown and nearly nonexistent run. Now he would gauge Noone's true worth. It would be a pity if the human had already expired from

gravitic distress, but Viveca could live with that. Such a death was invariably lingering and painful.

It occurred to him to call back the nashtah lest it be injured by the man trap, but as he rounded a bend he realized his caution was unnecessary. The durasteel activation plate lay on the ground, inactive and unoccupied. The hound was busily pawing at the reeds on the opposite side. Puzzled, Viveca stepped forward to examine the remote activator. Nothing remained of the device save a burnt fistful of dull melted alloy.

A blaster shot! Noone had accomplices! Cursing, he shouldered his rifle and scanned the trail for a surprise ambush. Nothing happened, and Viveca realized that the fugitives would have fled in panic at the earliest opportunity.

His opponent had cheated! The thought ran through his mind with such palpable disgust it approached physical nausea. Lack of ability he could understand. Stupidity even, in a pitying way. But poor sportsmanship? Never. He would find everyone involved and flay their hides with a high-intensity laser.

The nashtah, yapping feverishly at him, appeared to have picked up a scent. It pressed through the growth until only its rear set of legs were visible, trembling with anticipation and shaking the pale shoots violently. Viveca thought he heard nearby voices.

Fools. His lips curled in a triumphant sneer as he crept closer. Sad fools.

Yes indeed. A deep male voice was distinctly emanating from the copse just ahead, though he couldn't quite make out what it was saying. Viveca readied his weapon and parted the pliant shoots separating him from his trophy.

His eyes took in the tableau in an instant.

A white plastic ball, a child's toy, nestled in a bambooi cradle.

"OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD."

Two copper wires snaking into the toy's exposed innards, glued in place against a sound chip with what looked like orange maraffa sap.

"OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD."

Both golden filaments spilling to the ground and running up against -

"OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD."

- A melon-sized wad of detonite tape.

The nashtah whined. Viveca grimaced.

The explosion neatly flattened four hectares of bamboo.

Bacta was a miraculous panacea. It had cured plagues. It had healed the nearly dead. It had changed the face of modern medicine. Trouble was, it was almost criminally expensive.

Military goons took quality medical care for granted, Hass Sonax hissed to herself. For a no-name thief with uncertain credit and nonexistent insurance, the medcenters of Kabal might as well be impregnable castle keeps. Well, there was no other way they'd have to create a false admissions record in the city's central computer and skip out on the bill. Sighing, the Sluissi keyed up her cyborg interface band and prepared for some data slicing.

Across the yacht's opulent cabin, Noone lay stretched on an overstuffed acceleration couch, decorative throw pillows supporting his head and feet. Dawson sat on the floor next to him, reading the instruction manual that came with the ship's emergency medkit.

"And I'm saying that now's the perfect time to go for the Gun." Kels stopped pacing along the vessel's midline and tapped her foot anxiously. "If the Krish is dead, the manor's either in total chaos or quiet as the grave. Let's make a smash-and-grab now, before some local yeggs beat us to it."

Dawson quietly indicated Noone's makeshift pallet.

"Have some respect, will you? He's still breathing, and I'm trying to keep it that way."

"A medkit will keep him stable - "

"A medkit will not!" Dawson shot to his feet in an uncharacteristic display of anger. "How am I supposed to stop internal bleeding with synthflesh and gauze?"

Sonax unplugged her computer jack from the tech station and looked at them testily.

"Forgive me, but I ran across an interesssting entry in the law-enforcement database. We have to raise ssship, now. The authorities are halting all outgoing flights until passengers can be quesstioned."

Kels swore and sprinted for the cockpit.

"The looting will have to wait," Sonax called after her. "And we'll have to find an off-planet bacta facility."

Dawson nodded and secured Noone to the couch with crash webbing. As he hustled aft to jump-start the rear converters, he abruptly skidded to a stop on the polished deck plates.

"Sonax!" he cried. "We forgot about the landing shackle!"

Kea Ki Trang strode confidently up the ramp of the star yacht berthed at Docking Pad P13. The ship was a beauty, all right, though her defensive cannons were far too large for a vessel of her size. He'd be sure to have a few words with the captain about proper commercial lift/mass ratios. And, while he was at it, it wouldn't hurt to see a waiver for that military turbolaser.

Two handpicked members of his security detail took position behind him as he rapped on the hatch.

"This is Palisade Starport Control, requesting to speak to the captain of the..." he consulted his clipboard, "Spiraling Shape. Open the hatch immediately."

Trang had no idea the owners of this craft were involved in that odd explosion at Viveca's place, but the mayor had demanded a full security crackdown. Fortunately, Tabor and Kilgore had a crudely effective way of loosening tongues. He knocked again.

"I repeat, this is Palisade Starport Control. Open the hatch or we will do it for you." He nodded to Tabor, who moved toward the portal with an electronic lock breaker. In response, the ship shivered and whined with the familiar sounds of startup.

The three officers stepped back onto the sizzling tarmac, throwing each other amused grins. The vessel couldn't go anywhere with the docking pad's heavy durasteel security shackle still affixed to its landing gear strut. By starting their engines anyway, they were tacitly admitting their own guilt. Trang shook his head and signaled the control tower. A squad of armored soldiers trooped forth, each carrying a heavy blaster rifle.

The yacht floated forward on its repulsorlifts a few scant centimeters, but the shackle's chain caught and held fast. In his thirteen years on the job, Trang had never seen one break. He stood well back and folded his arms to watch the fun.

The landing skids bounced up and down against the permacrete as the ship futilely bucked the chain. The soldiers marched closer, readying their weapons for a disabling shot.

Without warning, the yacht's huge bank of sublight engines came online with an earsplitting roar. The troopers halted in their tracks, and Trang's mouth dropped open in astonishment. What in the galaxy were they doing?

The tether shuddered as the ship strained forward, whipping furiously from side to side. The manacled landing-gear strut bent backward sickeningly. Suddenly realizing what would happen next, Trang waved his arms frantically at the oncoming soldiers.

"Shoot them!" he shouted, but his words were lost in the thunderous rumble.

In a single horrible instant, the strut wrenched free from the body of the yacht, tearing loose a structural girder, numerous hull plates, the other rear landing strut, and the entire aft repulsorlift assembly. Trang hit the ground as the chain snapped backward. The twisted mass of jagged starship parts sailed safely over his head.

The crippled vessel blasted out to sea, bouncing against the breakers like a skipping stone. Pointing its nose skyward, the yacht ignited its ion engines, vaporizing a cone of saltwater that left a swelling spray of white mist.

Moments later, the fugitive ship vanished into the thick gray clouds.

The Draw

"All right, Blue Boy, bring it on home. "

Starlines resolved into a blue-green planet as Mair Koda dropped her freighter out of hyperspace over Vernet. "Lookin' good, " she murmured, smiling at the first sight of her homeworld in over six months. The Blue Boy dropped through the cloud cover; Mair followed the familiar coastline into the grain belts of Vernet's southeastern continent. She nudged her ship over the mountains of the continental spine and Maz-Verlin came into view, the city's lights still glimmering in the minutes before dawn. Mair aimed for the starport's red and blue lights.

What's that? Mair wondered as she caught sight of an unfamiliar pattern of ground lights. It looked as if a cluster of buildings had been erected in the north of the city, but the sky was too dark and Blue Boy moving too fast for her to make out any details. She made a mental note to ask about it later.

The farming colonies on Vernet were small enough that the locals considered a star freighter's arrival a major event. As Mair strode down the ramp onto the packed clay field that served as Maz-Verlin's spaceport, she saw a ring of spectators waiting to see what "good old" Mair" had brought for them this time. Even in the gray light of dawn she could recognize individuals and knew what each person wanted. Her foster-parents, Arn and Emmi Stonelaw, had ordered a new strain of crop seed, a calibrator for their laser plow and twenty meters of duranex to make new coveralls for their sons. Lome Turvey, local barkeeper as well as part-time operator of the spaceport, had requested as many recent holofeatures from the Core as Mair could bring him. Pursey Vermilla, local character, waited for disks of the latest fashions and (ever in vain) for a bolt of vine-silk.

"By thunder, " Mair swore, grinning broadly, "don't ya'll have anything better to do, that you're waiting for me at oh-dark-thirty in the morning?"

"Welcome home. Mair, " said Pursey, pushing to the front of the crowd. "Did you find my silk?"

With her clients' assistance, Mair had most of her cargo offloaded by mid-day. Only a few bulky pieces of farm machinery remained on board as she handed the bolt of duranex over to fifteen-year-old Yuri Stonelaw and smiled as the fair-haired boy staggered under its weight.

"Hey, why didn't your brother show up, kid?" Mair asked, helping the boy get a grip on the bolt. Yuri scowled, the expression seeming out of place on his round, rosy-cheeked face. "What's the matter?" Mair continued, "is Kristoff sick or something? I haven't seen him all morning-usually he's first in line when I come in-after Pursey, of course. "

"Kristoff, " said Arn Stonelaw, taking the duranex from his son, "has more important concerns now than waiting around the spaceport. "

"What, he married?" Mair hooted. She stopped laughing; Arn's expression was grim and Yuri's was downright venomous. All right, I put my foot in it, I'm sorry-what's wrong?"

"Everything, " Yuri began, but his father cut him off.

"Nothing's wrong-just different, that's all. Folks gotta adjust. Now help me. Yuri, this cloth's heavy. Mair-you come out to the farm tonight, have supper. "

Mair nodded agreement as the Stonelaws moved off, then shook her head in wonder at whatever mysterious changes had befallen her friends as she went back into her ship to clean up.

* * *

Twisting her wet, black hair into a knot at the nape of her neck. Mair stood on the Blue Boy's ramp looking out across the landing pad into town. Center Street seemed empty for that time of day. Most afternoons there would be a

group of boys, led by Kris Stonelaw, playing an impromptu game of no-rules quambah while anyone else with time on their hands watched. Now there was no one about but three pastel-furred pittins chasing leaves and one short, stocky figure walking toward the ship.

"Hey, Yuri!" Mair called. "Your parents think they need to send you to fetch me to dinner? Ya'll think I'm going to pass up home-cooking after weeks of space grunge?"

Yuri smiled as she put an arm around him. "I'm so glad you're home, Mair, " he said, "it's so good to have somebody to talk to again. "

"What, Kristoff suddenly too grown-up to listen to a little spud like you?"

Yuri stopped, looked Mair dead in the face. "They took him, " he said. His blue eyes, which for as long as Mair could remember had held nothing but laughter, were full of loss as he repeated, "They took him. They took all the boys. "

"Who?" Mair asked, stunned.

Yuri looked down the empty street, then began tugging Mair's arm, leading her back to the ship. "You don't know?" He said. "No one's told you?"

The spacer shook her head. "I'm a fungus, and they keep me in the dark. What's wrong? How bad can it be if your folks didn't contact me-and don't yank my arm off!" she protested as Yuri pulled her into the Blue Boy.

"The Empire, " Yuri said, as if that explained everything. "They ripped up a bunch of forest, built a base, and drafted all the young men to be soldiers. "

Mair collapsed into a battered conform-lounger in shock. "There goes the neighborhood. " she groaned. "All the young men?"

"Everybody between eighteen and twenty-five, " Yuri said, "everybody able-bodied that is. They didn't take Daoud Vari-even though the Empire could afford to fit him with prosthetics. "

"If the Empire wanted recruits without legs, they'd cut'em off themselves, " said Mair. "I suppose, when they came in, they gave ya'll a load of tripe about

'preparedness' and 'ensuring Vernet's security' and 'working together to combat galactic instability, " right?"

"Yeah-how'd you know?"

"Same load of tripe they always start out with. I got friends - same thing's happening on worlds all over. The Imps come on all truth and justice, and next think you know they're pawing through every cargo shipment and trying to stuff homing beacons up your nose, "

Yuri leaned toward the spacer, his earnest look incongruous on his childish features. "Then you understand. Mair, why we've got to get Kris out of there. "

"Whoa, cool your ion drives, boy!" said Mair, blinking. "How did we get from 'Imps make sorry neighbors' to 'we've gotta get Kris out'?"

"Well, we can't let him become like them, can we?" said Yuri as if stating a self-evident fact.

Mair sighed. "You don't know what you're asking me, boy. "

"I know a way into the camp, if you just hold lookout for me. "

"And if I got spotted I'd have to leave Vernet and never come back. Never mind what'd happen if I got caught. "

"We won't get caught, " the boy insisted. "We can't just give Kris up!"

"And what do you think will happen to him after if we get him out-the Empire ain't too kind to deserters. He'd have to leave too. "

"He could ship out with you, " Yuri suggested.

"How would your parents feel about that?"

"Better than they do now-at least he'd be free. He might as well be gone already, or dead, for all we see of him. If he gets off-world at least we'll know he's got a chance to lead his own life. Please help us, Mair. "

Mair dropped her head into her hands, sighing. "I can think of about a hundred good reasons to go on as if we'd never had this talk-but I love you and Kristoff like brothers. I'll be taking off again in a few days, and by thunder Kris'll be with me. Tell me how we're going to get into the camp. "

* * *

Yuri climbed out of the creek and shook water from his clothes. Drawing the waterproof pouch from his tunic, he removed the blaster he'd taken from his father's cupboard and checked again to ensure the selector was set to "stun. " The wind whipped through the tree tops. A nightscreeg called mournfully to its mate as they hunted by the light of Vernet's three moons. Yuri willed himself to be brave. He stood as tall as he was able and tried to suck in his belly, but the large stack of chor-cakes he'd eaten to fortify himself for this midnight commando run made it difficult. He felt as if he'd swallowed a lump of ferrocrete.

A splash from the creek caught his ear. He ducked behind a clump of underbrush and waited: it should be Mair, swimming beneath the camp's perimeter field as he had, but it wouldn't hurt to be careful. A dark object was (lung out of the water onto the grassy bank: a blaster rifle. A figure clambered from the creek and Yuri tensed in fear: instead of the familiar silhouette of Mair Koda, he saw the glossy armored form of an Imperial scout. Swallowing back both his fear and his chor-cakes, Yuri leapt out of the bushes and opened fire on the interloper. 'Thunder and lightning, Yuri! It's me!' came the trooper's modulated voice, as the armored figure dove to the ground. "Put that thing away-you want to wake up everyone on the night-side of the planet?"

Yuri lowered his weapon. "Mair?"

She pulled off her scout trooper helmet. "You spud!" she ex-claimed. "I told you I'd be disguised!"

"But as one of them?"

Mair snorted. "How else is a woman supposed to get around an Imperial Army training post?" She jammed the helmet back on. "Ugly as it is, I still can't show my face-besides, I have a backup plan in case we get spotted. " She got to her feet, shaking water from her armor. "The classic 'you're my prisoner' routine. Give me your gun, Yuri, and put your hands on your head. "

Yuri complied. "I'm sorry I shot at you. "

"Forget about it-with your aim, you couldn't hit a Hutt. "

"Where'd you get that armor?" Yuri asked.

"From a friend. "

"Where'd your friend get it?"

Mair paused. "Yuri, there are some questions you're off not asking. Just start marching, and we'll get your brother out of that camp before the Imps even know we were here. Don't worry. "

* * *

They moved out of the woods across the training fields, heading toward the central complex. Yuri, hands still on his head, walked ahead of Mair, who held her rifle level with his back. They traveled in silence for a long while. Finally. Yuri spoke: "Mair?"

"Keep it down, " Mair hissed. "We're getting close, and if anyone hears us talking, we're busted. "

"But I was wondering.... "

"What?"

"I've heard Imperials use brainwashing-what if Kristoff doesn't want to be rescued?"

Mair said nothing; the same fear had been preying on her mind, but there was no way she was going to share that with Yuri. "Of course he'll want to be rescued, " she said, as much to reassure herself as the boy. "if only because army chow is nasty. By the way, she said, changing the subject, "stroke of genius, swimming under the security field like that. "

Yuri shrugged. "I saw fish swim back and forth under it, and figured anything they could do, I could do. I spend a lot of time there, sitting by the creek. " He

sighed. "I can't believe it was only this summer when Kris and I were swimming there. The last day-'course I didn't know then it was the last day-we caught mud crabs and built little pens out of dirt to hold 'em, but they kept getting away. "

"Just like we're gonna get away, " said Mair. "Now hush up, we're getting close to the barracks. "

* * *

Security problems were apparently far from the commander's mind at the Vernet training camp; Mair and Yuri were able to make their silent way among the buildings undetected. The door to trainees' barracks was locked from the outside, but Mair sliced it open easily with a few strokes of her electro-pick. Yuri slipped quietly inside while Mair stood by the door in her scout's armor and tried to look like she belonged there.

Yuri paused while his eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the windowless barrack and then began searching for his brother among the bunks. All the sons of Vernet lay sleeping in identical rows, each in identical drab underclothes, each with his hair shorn away. Some slept so quietly they could have been dead, and Yuri shivered at the thought that he was creeping through a morgue filled with all the companions of his childhood.

He found Kristoff on a lower bunk halfway down the line. He paused to look at his brother. Kristoff Stonelaw was tall, muscular, strong-featured, and handsome: everything young Yuri hoped to become in a few years' time. Yuri reached out to tap his brother's shoulder gently.

"Kris?" he whispered.

Kristoff's eyes flew open immediately. "Yuri? What're you doing here?"

"Come on, " Yuri whispered eagerly, "Mair's waiting outside. "

"What?" Kristoff's eyes were full of bewilderment.

"She's going to take you off-world. Come on, Kris, before the others wake up. "

"Off-world?" Kristoff sat up in his bunk. "Yuri, what are you talking about?"

"We're getting you out of here. We're rescuing you. "

"Rescuing me?" Kristoff asked in an incredulous tone of voice. "I don't need any rescuing. What kind of garbage has Mair been telling you?"

* * *

What is taking so long? Mair wondered; she feared she knew. Come on. Kris, listen to your brother, the spud's got sense. Come on think with your own brain...

As she stood there, the event Mair had feared the most happened: a lone night patrol guard walked around the corner of the barrack, nearly bumping into her.

"Hey!" said the guard, "what are you doing here? What's your operating number?"

Mair stared silently at the guard and fingered the safety on her gun.

"I'm talking to you, kid, " the guard continued, "do you even know tonight's pass phrase?"

Passphrase? Mar wondered. Oh, well... "Darth Vader wears frilly underclothes?" she suggested cheerfully as she whipped out her blaster, stunned the guard and ran.

* * *

The shot outside their door woke the recruits; instantly the quiet of the barracks was replaced by the grunting, shouting, and other sounds of 100 young men tumbling out of their bunks. Yuri gave Kristoff one last agonized glance; Kristoff snatched at his brother but missed. Yuri shoved his way through the dark confusion and darted out the door.

Mair was nowhere to be seen, so Yuri just kept running, away from the buildings and out through the woods toward the main gate of the camp, while lights and sirens came on and the sounds of pursuit grew louder and more organized behind him.

Luckily, Yuri found a huge nole tree not far into the woods. He flung himself up the branches and was a good four meters off the ground before the pack of drowsy, half-naked recruits blundered past, waving infra-red scanners haphazardly through the underbrush and shouting. He waited until the ruckus had passed him by, then slipped down the tree. He quietly doubled back towards the creek, skirting the compound and its lights.

Yuri paused at the edge of the water, wondering: stay or go? His heart pounded in fear at what the Imperials might do if they caught him, but how could he ever abandon Kristoff?

"Yuri, " said a familiar voice behind him. The boy turned to face his brother. Unlike his comrades, Kristoff had put on trousers, boots, and gun belt before leaving the barrack. He stared intently at Yuri. "I knew you'd be here, " he said with the ghost of a smile. "I knew this was how you had to have gotten in. "

"Kris, come with us. " said Yuri. "It's still not too late. "

Kristoff shook his head. "I belong here, " he said. "This is where I want to be. "

"You didn't think that way when they came to draft you. "

"That's because I didn't know better, " said Kristoff. His eyes shone glassily in the light of the setting moons. "Yuri, I don't know what kind of lies that Mair is telling you, but-"

"She hasn't told me anything. "

Kristoff held up his hand for silence. "Yuri, you have to understand. The galaxy is in a very fragile state right now. We live in dangerous times. Threats to our planet are everywhere-smugglers, pirates, anarchist rebel terrorists. Vernet has to be prepared to defend herself, and I'm proud to be a part of her defense. Can't you see I'm this for you?"

"They won't let you come and visit us, " said Yuri. "And they won't even let us send you messages!"

"Sacrifices must be made, " said Kristoff. "Now, come with me, Yuri. "

"What?"

"I have to turn you in to my commanding officer. He'll want to question you about how you got in here. "

"Why don't you tell him?"

"Standard procedures, Yuri. I have to turn you in. And he'll need to discipline you. "

"Huh?" Yuri's eyes grew wide with fear.

"He won't harm you. Yuri, not permanently, " said Kristoff, his voice eerily calm. "It'll be painful, but we have to make an example of you. " He raised his blaster.

Yuri backed up to the brink of the water. "Kris, what are you doing with that gun?"

"If you won't come willingly, I'll have to-"

"Kris, look at what you're doing!" Yuri cried. "They're making you shoot me, they're messing up your mind!"

Something grabbed Yuri's legs from behind and yanked him into the creek before Kristoff could fire on him. He struggled, but strong arms pulled him beneath the force barrier and hauled him from the water outside the camp.

"Come on, " said Mair, now stripped of her armor, as she hustled the boy onto her swoop bike. "We can't help him!"

"Kris!" Yuri cried one last time. He looked over his shoulder as the swoop took off, to see his brother standing just inside the force field, his gun hanging limp in his hand, a puzzled look on his face.

* * *

Maz-Verlin was in chaos when the bike roared down Center Street: lights were on all over, and people were milling aimlessly in the road.

"You can't get to your ship, Mair, " said Lome Turvey, standing at the entrance to the spaceport. "They're having some kind of problem out at the base, called and said I had to close the port. "

Mair gave him a withering look. "Do you think that included keeping me away from my own property?"

"Well, um.... "

"Didn't think so, " she said, pulling the bike around him.

"What about the Stonelaw boy?" Turvey called after her.

"I need his help, " Mair said as she drove up the ramp into the Blue Boy.

They were in hyperspace before anyone could stop them.

* * *

"Hey, spud, buck up, " said Mair, as she sat down on the bunk beside Yuri and put her arm around his shoulders.

"I can't go home now, can I?" he asked.

Mair shook her head. "You heard what Kris said-by the time they were done 'disciplining' you on that base, they would have tortured you until your brains were mashed chorba. They would do the same to me, if they caught me. There's no going back for either of us. "

Yuri sighed and leaned his head against Mair's shoulder. "I can t believe they turned my own brother against me. " His voice hitched and tears began to run down his cheeks. "I can't believe Kris was going to shoot me. I've lost him forever. "

"Hey, hey, " said Mair, hugging the boy and blinking away tears her own. "He didn't shoot you, did he? He could've jumped in the creek after us and caught us, but he didn't. "

Yuri nodded silently.

"Deep down inside, some part of him didn't want to turn you in, didn't want to hurt you. Yuri, we may not've won Kristoff back from the Empire, but I don't think we've lost him all the way yet, either. " She smiled at Yuri through her tears. "Consider this round a draw. "

Talnar's Rescue

Captain Nels enters the room in a hurried manner. He quickly takes a seat and pulls out a battered datapad. He punches a few keys and says, "I have a mission for you. We received this report from the Naalol System."

He sets a holoprojector on the table and activates it. An unfamiliar light freighter flashes by, pursued by a *Guardian*-class Light Cruiser. A brief but spectacular battle ensues. The freighter pilot's skills are impressive, and his ship's armaments are clearly more than the Imperials bargained for. They are evenly matched, as shot after shot hits home. In one final volley, both ships are critically damaged. The freighter descends to the planet below. The Imperials are adrift, engines disabled and hull heavily damaged.

"The freighter is one of ours, called the *Golden Jewel*. Its captain is Lieutenant Talnar, one of our agents. We believe he dropped out of hyperspace to transmit a message via our communications satellite in the system. Either he had no chance to transmit or he didn't want to tip off the Imperials to our satellite's presence. If his mission was successful, he was returning to base with a cargo of droids."

"The *Golden Jewel* crashed on Naalol. We have the coordinates from the satellite. We want you to bring Talnar and the droids back to us. He doesn't have much time. The Empire will send for reinforcements soon. You must get to Talnar before they do."

Force And Destiny: Keeping The Peace

How much farther?" Even Om'rahk's booming voice sounded feeble as it forced its way into the blowing wall of sand. The Whiphid brushed the flying grit from his goggles and looked up, but the sky was concealed by the hissing storm. Thicker than a Toola blizzard, and far less pleasant.

"Not far now. The storm is growing. But we will reach our destination before the wind becomes deadly."

Om'rahk grunted in response, but he wasn't sure if the Iktotchi ahead heard him. He could barely see Nonia Daal's armored form, so dense was the sandstorm shrouding her. Then, a few steps later, the wall of flying silt parted as the two reached the mouth of a cave. The Whiphid took a few more steps away from the swirling eddies of sand at the cave mouth, then shook himself vigorously, sending grains of silt scattering. He watched as Nonia brushed off her armor, deftly inspecting the joints for sand buildup, and then the pair began walking deeper into the cave.

Looking around the hollow, Om'rahk could tell that it was inhabited, though he had to admit that the signs were well hidden. A suspiciously rectangular scrape on the wall from a speeder truck here, a fused bit of sand from a blaster bolt there. He had seen dozens of pirate hideouts like it in the Outer Rim over the decades. Even before the Empire's tariffs and bans set the smuggling industry booming, notorious sorts had inhabited such far-flung locales.

"Is this the place? Where's your friend, the Lannik?"

The Iktotchi sighed, and nodded up ahead.

"Couldn't wait for us to get started, huh? I knew I liked her as soon as you two hired me back in Torosh."

A startled shout issued from deeper in the cave, and a body came bouncing down the tunnel, rolling to stop at Om'rahk's massive feet. The Whiphid reached down to touch the human's neck and felt a pulse. He hefted the unconscious pirate in one massive hand, placing him in a sitting position against the wall. A moment later, a Lannik marched into the room, dragging the unconscious form of a muscular Twi'lek at least twice her size behind her.

"I told you to wait, Taelo," the Iktotchi said, resigned.

"But when you told me to wait, you knew that I wouldn't and let me go ahead anyway, right? So the way I see it, it doesn't really count against me." The Lannik grinned widely.

"That isn't how that works."

"Don't worry, I saved most of them for you. I just needed to get warmed up before we started for real."

The Whiphid let out a booming laugh. It was good to be in the company of fighters again. He had taken too many jobs managing boring security details in the last few decades. Maybe it was time to strike out as a mercenary full time again. There were plenty of pirates, racketeers, and other petty scumbags lurking in the Outer Rim, preying on the weak. Getting paid to help people wasn't a bad prospect. These two novice hunters—if they were bounty hunters—could probably use a veteran to keep an eye on them, Om'rahk thought to himself. They almost reminded him of someone, though he could not say why.

Taelo slid under the pirate's wild blow, slamming her shoulder into his abdomen before sliding one of her legs behind the Barabel's. With a heave, she brought the massive, reptilian raider down, letting gravity deliver a blow with the force of his considerable weight. The Barabel did not rise. Nonia gave a sharp look in the Lannik's direction.

"Oh, he'll be fine. Behi—"

Even as Taelo began her warning, the Iktotchi side-stepped slightly and shifted into a solid stance to brace herself against the coming blow. The pirate's knife skittered for purchase across her laminate shoulderpad and failed to find it. As it slid off harmlessly, Nonia delivered her elbow to the pirate's face and he stumbled back.

"Never mind. You've got him."

The pair turned to see the last few pirates fleeing around a corner, trying to escape their lair. The ring of several stun blasts rang out, and then Om'rahk trudged around the corner, dumping several unconscious marauders in a pile in the corner. He nodded to the pair with a toothy grin, then moved to begin taking inventory of the pirates' stolen spoils.

The Lannik looked up at Nonia. "On that subject, we had this under control. Why hire the extra muscle? We didn't need him to get those villagers' stuff back."

"He needed us." The Iktotchi looked over at the Whiphid, who had begun sorting the much-needed supplies they had been paid to retrieve.

"Don't be so cryptic, Nonia! We can't all see the future."

"Can you feel it? Listen to his breathing. It's too even."

"His... breathing? I said be *less* cryptic."

The Iktotchi shook her head, exasperated. "He was in danger in Torosh. We needed to get him to leave, before it was too late. The Empire's grip is tightening. They are coming."

"They? As in—" The Lannik's expression darkened.

"Yes, the killers we fought on Onderon. The ones who slew our teacher."

"Bring them on! We've been waiting for this. We're strong enough now!" Battle-hunger shone in the Lannik's eyes.

"No, Taelo. Revenge isn't our duty. Even justice isn't our duty today. Preservation is. Our teacher died to protect us. And now we have someone to keep safe. At least until he understands what his power means." She gestured at the Whiphid, who was busy packing medical supplies into a large sack for the return journey.

"Him? He's... like us? Isn't he too old? Whiphids live a long time, and he isn't young. What can we teach him? He might have known real Jedi. You know, in person."

"All the more reason, then. Our task is clear." The Iktotchi set her gaze toward the cave entrance, but Taelo could tell that her friend's sight rested on something much more distant. A future far past Torosh village, beyond the billowing sands of the desert, under the light of some distant star. "We must leave before the storm arrives."

Edge Of Empire: Special Modifications

Is our ship still on fire, Chalan?" Javlin's voice was muffled somewhat by the roar of the engines, the sparking of the consoles, and the guttering of the intervening flames.

"Yes Jav, your horrible ship is still on fire! And until you ease up on the engines, it's probably going to stay that way." The Twi'lek wiped her brow and turned back to the power coupling. If she could just...

A piercing burst of binary broke her concentration as WAC-77 burst into the room, dome head spinning and arms flailing in panic. Chalan couldn't quite make out anything coherent in the droid's stream of rapid-fire beeps and clicks, but she was pretty sure she understood its general meaning based on the awful wailing tone.

"Less whining, more fire extinguishing. We've only got a few minutes of oxygen if that fire keeps eating it up. Get on it, Wack!"

Another set of clicks followed, this time slow enough for Chalan to understand.

"Yes, I know you don't have lungs," Chalan said without looking at the droid. "But on the other hand, if I suffocate, who will keep your hardware up to date? Javlin? Remember how the power outlets were when I got here?"

The droid whirled in response.

"That's right, they were running the wrong current for anything built off Ojom, including you. So I expect that fire to be smaller when I turn around."

Gratifyingly, the droid's only response was the hiss of chemical propellant. Chalan let out a sigh and reached to her belt for a hydrosponder.

A sudden explosion rocked the ship, and the hydrosponder clattered to the deck. The lights flickered, then sparked, plunging the corridor into darkness. The only light came from the flaming console. Chalan turned over her shoulder and shouted toward the cockpit. "What was that, Jav?"

"What?"

"What... Was... That?"

"Can't hear you over the sound of our ship's engines. They supposed to be rumbling like that?"

Chalan ran her hand across the deck, grabbed the hydrosponder, and made her way toward the cockpit.

"No, they are not supposed to be rumbling like that. Didn't I tell you to lay off the engines?"

The Besalisk did not turn in her chair to greet Chalan, and continued deftly operating the freighter's controls with her four arms while speaking. The starfield before the ship spun dizzily as the craft twisted through the void.

"Took it under consideration. Polled the Black Sun pilots on our tail. Funny thing, they wouldn't agree to slow down just because we wanted to. How rude, right?" Emphasizing her point, another streak of laser fire whipped past the viewscreen from behind, dissipating into the vastness of space.

"Well, if the engines explode, we die. Just keep that in mind."

"So keep our ship's engines from exploding!"

"I would really like to do that, Jav. It would be easier if I could actually get to the right conduits. Unfortunately, the console I need is currently on fire because you won't slow the ship down."

"Those Scyks will blow our ship to pieces. Find me an answer, Chalan."

Chalan let out a long breath laced with guttural intonations of frustration. "Fine. I get it. Perform some feat of scientific genius or we die. The usual, right?"

"There you go."

"Okay. I could fix the engines through the panel if it wasn't on fire. The fire's only going to keep getting worse while the engines are running. We can't turn the engines off. So we need to put the fire out. And Wack doesn't have lungs."

"Wait, what?"

"Hold on, I need to go blow a small hole in the back of the ship."

"Wait, WHAT?"

"Just fly. I'll make sure we don't explode. Well, that we only explode a little bit."

Chalan stepped through the door to see WAC-77 flailing futilely at the growing blaze. The droid's beeps conveyed its rising panic. Though it was designed for tune-ups rather than true repairs, it'd function well enough. Provided that it paid attention to her instructions. "Listen, Wack. I'm going to blow the hatch. The atmosphere will rush out and the fire will starve. Then I can talk you through the repairs."

The droid let out a quick series of beeps.

"Yes, I can see why you'd think now is a good time to negotiate for upgrades. Fine. If we don't all die, I'll install those advanced limb hydraulics you want."

The droid nodded, turned, and stepped dutifully toward the console as Chalan prepped the rear hatch to blow and returned to the cockpit.

"You were kidding about blowing a hole in my ship, right?"

"Our ship," Chalan said as she sealed the cockpit. She leapt into the copilot's chair and pulled up her comm. "Are you bolted down, Wack? Good. Preparing to blow hatch in 3...2...1!"

Is our ship still on fire, Chalan?" Javlin's voice was muffled somewhat by the roar of the engines, the sparking of the consoles, and the guttering of the intervening flames.

"Yes Jav, your horrible ship is still on fire! And until you ease up on the engines, it's probably going to stay that way." The Twi'lek wiped her brow and turned back to the power coupling. If she could just...

A piercing burst of binary broke her concentration as WAC-77 burst into the room, dome head spinning and arms flailing in panic. Chalan couldn't quite make out anything coherent in the droid's stream of rapid-fire beeps and clicks, but she was pretty sure she understood its general meaning based on the awful wailing tone.

"Less whining, more fire extinguishing. We've only got a few minutes of oxygen if that fire keeps eating it up. Get on it, Wack!"

Another set of clicks followed, this time slow enough for Chalan to understand.

"Yes, I know you don't have lungs," Chalan said without looking at the droid. "But on the other hand, if I suffocate, who will keep your hardware up to date? Javlin? Remember how the power outlets were when I got here?"

The droid whirred in response.

"That's right, they were running the wrong current for anything built off Ojom, including you. So I expect that fire to be smaller when I turn around."

Gratifyingly, the droid's only response was the hiss of chemical propellant. Chalan let out a sigh and reached to her belt for a hydrospanner.

A sudden explosion rocked the ship, and the hydrospanner clattered to the deck. The lights flickered, then sparked, plunging the corridor into darkness. The only light came from the flaming console. Chalan turned over her shoulder and shouted toward the cockpit. "What was that, Jav?"

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Cries Of Alderaan

Since the destruction of Alderaan, fear has spread throughout the galaxy. Despite a major victory against the Death Star, members of the Rebel Alliance struggle to gain allies against the Galactic Empire.

Under the command of Princess Leia, the Rebels have constructed a hidden base in the Corellian system. Driven by memories of her beloved planet, she directs covert diplomatic missions to gather support against the Emperor and his enforcer Darth Vader.

Unbeknownst to the Empire or Leia, one of her top spies has stumbled across information on the secret Imperial project DEAD EYE and its apprehensive lead scientist. The fate of the galaxy could depend on what becomes of that information....

Loyalists of the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire have obtained fragments of two separate secret messages. Brave heroes must rally together to get these vital disks back so that they may assemble and decode them. The secrets contained within could sway the Galactic Civil War.



ENCODED IMPERIAL TRANSMISSION. Confirmation code #15-A86Q.
Attention, all officers. Urgent orders enclosed. Summary: an Alliance spy has misappropriated documents. Keywords: Project Dead Eye, Vacca (Doctor), Rebel Alliance.

ALERT ALERT ALERT

A Rebel spy, possibly Codename Skimmer, has obtained vital documents related to a secret research project, codenamed Project Dead Eye. These documents are encrypted, and we believe that the Alliance does not have the means to decrypt them, but we cannot permit the risk that the project be revealed. It is urgent that any and all Rebels associated with the delivery of this material be terminated with extreme prejudice.

Loyal Imperial officers are already guarding Doctor Vacca, and security will need to be increased. Deployments in the vicinity of the Project should prepare for emergency personnel requisitions in the event of the Project needing increased manpower

An informal note: Vacca may work with filthy furbags, but you all know the critical nature of this project. IT MUST NOT SLIP, or Vader will have all our heads, starting with mine.

-Moff Jerjerrod

ALLIANCE EYES ONLY. Pass the word. Lyda managed to get hold of some important info about that secret Imperial project we've heard rumblings about.

Now they're after her. They call her Codename Skimmer, ha, if they knew how close they got to her real name! Break. Anyway, keep an eye out for her—she might try to contact you. She's gone deep underground, and we have no idea where she is. Whatever you do, you MUST NOT give up her identity. Break.

Also, see what else you can find out about these two things. One, the codename for the secret project is apparently "Dead Eye"; see if you can dig up any more information on it. Two, we need intel on a human doc named Vacca.

Looks like he vanished off of Alderaan ten years ago, and of course records from there are hard to come by now (curse the ashes of that slime Tarkin). We need all the information we can get, but DON'T let anyone know you're looking too hard. Break. Word is the Princess is personally interested in this one, so maybe if you get lucky, you can earn yourself a shiny medal too. Grease the power couplings if you need to—the budget is going to stretch if need be. Break.

You all know it'll break Lyda's mom's heart if we can't get her home safe. She's lost enough in the last few years, and now her daughter's off risking her neck. Lyda's spunk may have taken her a bit too far this time. Let's be careful out there.

DERLIN, SIGNING OUT

Alliance Operative Field Dossier: Skimmer

Code Name: Skimmer

Name: Lyda Skims

Race: Human

Age: 24

Height: 1.67 meters

Weight: 55 kg

Hair: Black

Eyes: Blue

Current Project:

Signals Intercept - NOTE: Assignment has recently uncovered Imperial Project Dead Eye. Unfortunately, data disks outlining our initial report of her findings have been misappropriated by several underworld organizations including the so-called "Meatlumps" gang and various Swoopers. Agents in the field have had some luck in recovering the disks but many remain missing.

Current Status:

Unknown: Following the retrieval of data relating to the Imperial project known as Dead Eye, Lyda has gone into hiding. We are currently trying to contact her and retrieve the Dead Eye plans.

Previous Assignments and Results:

Data disk delivery: Delivery to drop zone and recovery of disk successful.

Data disk delivery: Delivery hampered by previously unknown Imperial patrol in the drop area. Rather than abort mission she attempted surveillance, was caught and charged with trespassing. An Imperial transport was dispatched to deliver her for processing. However, when the transport experienced a mechanical failure, she used that opportunity to make her escape.

Surveillance of Imperial Installation: In an effort to get better footage of the operation, climbed a fence and was detected. Evaded capture by fleeing into the wilderness. Data from this operation proved to be of the highest quality, however.

Known Skills:

Her former work at her mother's textiles facility has given her a broad knowledge of clothing design as well as engineering and droid repair. Aside from being technically minded, her interests include the arts and modern dance.

Lyda lacks any significant proficiency in combat. However, her technical skills, tenacious nature and fearlessness led her to be an exceptional choice for her most recent undercover mission.

Background:

Father, Doyle Skims (deceased). Y-Wing pilot killed during Alliance assault upon the Death Star. Doyle was posthumously awarded a medal of valor.

Mother, Lynn Skims. Lynn was the former owner of a small family-operated textiles business on Corellia. She sold the business after the loss of her husband.

Brother, Athon Skims (deceased): Alliance Medium Transport pilot killed during a delivery to Alliance contacts on Alderaan at the time of its destruction.

Other Notes:

I have known Lyda personally since she was a child. After the devastating losses of both her brother and her father, Lyda made the decision to join the Alliance in order to continue their family's tradition of service.

Though she possesses a great many qualities such as courage, resourcefulness and intelligence her youthful exuberance often leads her to go beyond the scope of her missions. However, I am quite confident that with the proper training she can be cultivated to become one of our most reliable and successful agents.

After stealing the plans for a secret Imperial project called Dead Eye, Rebel Spy Lyda Skims, code name Skimmer, is on the run. Hiding from the Empire, even her compatriots are unable to find her and the Dead Eye information she has stolen from the Empire.

Meanwhile, the creator of Dead Eye, Dr. Vacca, vacillates between his loyalty (and fear) for the Empire and his grief over the destruction of his home world, Alderaan. His decision to back one side or the other will determine who controls Dead Eye, and possibly shift the balance of the war. The Galactic Empire and the Rebellion are trying to find ways to convince Vacca to make the right choice.



Following a massive hunt for the Rebel operative Lyda Skims, both the Rebellion and the Empire are fighting to control a secret military project called "Dead Eye". At the heart of this struggle is the project's creator, a doctor from Alderaan named Vacca. Working under a grant from the Empire, Vacca had created a stim designed to enhance the combat ability of any frontline Soldier.

As Vacca vacillated between his fear of the Empire and love of his destroyed Alderaan, both the Rebels and Imperials tried to sway him to join their cause. The rebellion sent operatives to relay a message from Princess Leia appealing to Vacca's sense of justice. In an attempt to seal his continued cooperation, the Empire responded with the killing of many Drall who supported Vacca.

After much consideration Vacca has made his choice and delivered the Dead Eye plans...



Swoop Gangs

The high pitched screams of multiple repulsorlift engines echoed through the narrow streets and alleys of Gallisport, announcing yet another clash between the authorities and the local residents. Barely ahead of pursuit, two repulsorlift swoops raced along at breakneck speeds. The drivers wore the distinctive red and black colors of a local swoop gang, the Rabid Mynocks. Behind the swoops a pair of lightly armored personnel carriers followed dangerously close, engines strained to the limit. The swoop riders had yet to lose the carriers in the maze of streets and buildings of the abandoned business district, despite some dangerous maneuvers.

Quayce, the raven-haired rider on the lead swoop, swore through clenched teeth, then activated the comlink headset she wore. "Why don't they go home already!" she yelled into the mike. "I mean, all we did was steal a few loaves of bread."

On the trailing swoop, Roy adjusted the throttles and pulled up aside Quayce's swoop before answering. "Raiding a food distribution center and picking it dry is more than just 'stealing a few loaves of bread.' Or don't you make such distinctions?"

"I don't make distinctions when I'm hungry," she grumbled. "Besides, they started this one. Just because a few factory workers go on strike is no reason to stop distributing food to the rest of us."

"Moot point now." Roy declared. "Besides, we've gotta get back before they give out all the good stuff!"

Quayce dared a quick look over her shoulder. Barely 10 meters behind her the two carriers hummed, the letters "L.A.L.A." in dark metallic blue visible on the drab gray hull. This was wrong, she thought. Legally Authorized Law Authorities (called LA-LAs by the gangs) were not supposed to be this dedicated. Hired by a corrupt government to keep control in places real security forces feared to go, LA-LAs amounted to nothing more than paid bullies. In some of Gallisport's outer suburbs, the LA-LAs were actually run by the very same gangs and criminal organizations they were hired to apprehend. Unless they were paid well, there was very little incentive for the hired help to risk their lives to this degree.

Today's raid — no matter how daring in nature — had been small in comparison to the usual food riots. Striking just as the center's guards were changing shifts, the gang caught the defenders by surprise. The Rabid Mynocks were just withdrawing when the counter-attack began. The gang retreated and split into small groups, allowing the ground transports to get away with the stolen food. By now the transports should have reached their various destinations and the distribution of food to a hungry populace should be well under way. For the past 10 minutes Quayce and Roy had been leading the two personnel carriers on a wild gundark chase, buying the transports additional time. Usually the LA-LAs would have given up by now and withdrawn pursuit, but this time they were actually serious about performing their duties. The idea of giving free food to hungry people must have hit a nerve with someone high up. Quayce was convinced that right now someone was pulling strings and calling in favors to get such a dedicated response.

"Loading docks up ahead." Roy called over the comlink. "Your call, Boss."

Quayce thought it over for just a second before answering. "Let's play some high-low. I got high!" She pulled hard left, off the main street, disappearing down a connecting service tunnel. Simultaneously, Roy repeated the maneuver, but banked to the right and turned into a service tunnel on the opposite side of the street.

The carriers predictably split formation, one following Quayce, the other, Roy. The service tunnels were only about five meters high and not much wider. Built primarily as subterranean access for power and communication lines, the confining tunnels ruled out any thoughts of fancy maneuvers. Although the carriers were lightly armed, there was little fear they would actually open fire. They were built for crowd control and not high speed pursuit. Any shot would probably miss the smaller, more agile swoops, and the power drain would cause the carriers to lose speed.

The tunnels would continue to descend under the loading docks in a gently curving semi-circle before climbing back to street level. Quayce opened the throttle full. Behind her, the sudden change in pitch from the carrier's engine told her the LA-LAs had done the same. Hunching over her controls, Quayce adjusted her repulsor field, gaining as much altitude as she dared. Bare centimeters above her head, the ceiling raced by at a dizzying speed. Quayce allowed a smile to cross her tightly clenched lips, knowing that right now Roy would be performing a similar maneuver. Instead of gaining altitude, however, Roy would be cutting his repulsor field to almost nothing, allowing his swoop to hug the ground at a suicidal level.

The tunnel ascent had begun, the late afternoon light marking the exit just ahead. Holding her breath and mentally humming her favorite tune, Quayce blasted through the exit and back onto the main street. Immediately she banked hard to the left and turned her swoop into the center of the road. Roy's swoop emerged from its underground run across from her, trailing sparks as it bounced onto the street. With less than half a meter clearance, Roy passed directly under the bottom of Quayce's swoop. He immediately banked to the right, not daring to raise his head.

Just seconds behind them, two personnel carriers emerged from their respective tunnels at maximum speed. Even if the pilots of the armored carriers could react, there was no place for them to go. In a massive and quite spectacular manner, the two vehicles tried to occupy the same portion of the street at the exact same time. The impact caused a resounding explosion that shattered glass and shook buildings for more than a kilometer.

Slowing to a halt, both swoop riders finally let out their breath and

rose up from cramped positions. Looking back at the fireworks display, Roy let out a shout that would have been deafening — if the roar from the explosion had left their hearing intact. Quayce waited until the ringing stopped before asking Roy if he wanted to go somewhere and grab something to eat. Laughing hard from relief as much as from humor, they revved their swoops and headed home.

Alien Encounters: An Extinct Guest

Professor Tem Eliss is one of the most respected and well-known sentientologists in the galaxy. Head of the University of Sanbra's Sentient Studies Department and infamous for his blatant disregard of Imperial "protocol," Professor Eliss has studied sentient species and their cultures for decades. A native of the lyra homeworld F'tral, Eliss was raised among the stars rather than within the oceans, and was not immersed in lyra culture: this upbringing largely attributes to his being so unlike most of his kind.

Whereas most lyra have a reputation for being condescending, egotistical and downright obnoxious, Eliss is a gifted scholar and friend to many. In fact, many representatives of lyra culture and society rather dislike Professor Eliss for his keeping company with beings from other species.

Eliss's anti-Imperial rhetoric has gotten him into trouble on more than one occasion, and finally came to a boil a few months ago. At the request of the faculty, Eliss was preparing *The University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life* (see *Galaxy Guide 12: Aliens—Enemies and Allies*)...but he was not adhering to Imperial doctrine while doing so. COMPNOR loyalists on the Professor's staff alerted Imperial officials of the matter, and shortly thereafter Professor Eliss fled the University campus, taking his research materials with him. Subsequent attempts to locate and detain Eliss have met with failure.

Three weeks after his disappearance, Professor Eliss released *The Guide* to the student communication nets: it has since been forwarded to more than 25,000 comm nodes on thousands of worlds (much to the Empire's displeasure).

Following are additional entries to the University's *Guide* that Professor Eliss has drafted from wherever he is taking refuge and has posted to the comm nets. Imperial forces continue their search for the fugitive....

It had been a busy week for Professor Tem Eliss. The University of Sanbra had been thrown into turmoil by the recent Imperial removal of instructor Callow Batta in the History Department—continued pressure by Imperial officials regarding Eliss' work further hindered his progress. He had numerous projects to grade and conferences scheduled, and the Sentient Studies Department was hoping to receive the first volume of his University of Sanbra *Guide to Intelligent Life* sometime before the end of the term.

Tem sank into his old aquachair, numerous tentacles wrapping around the arms securely. He had over the last few days read portions of Rin's *Catalog of Intelligent Life in the Galaxy*, and that sickeningly pro-Imperial work only further prompted him to complete more of his own project. Unfortunately for Eliss, however, one lyra could only do so much in a 27-hour day. He switched off his terminal and sipped from a salty mug of brinebrew.

The door chimed and Professor Eliss sat up. "Come in," he called. He glanced at the wall chrono; student appointments didn't begin for another hour or so. For a moment he expected the sector Moff to enter with a guard of stormtroopers, ready to haul him off to

some interrogation center. Instead, a short reptilian being stood in the dimly-lit hallway.

The alien was less than a meter and a half tall, with a split tail nearly as thick as its body trailing behind.

"Professor Eliss?" the visitor asked quietly, bowing his head at the doorway.

"Yes," Eliss responded. "Can I help you?"

The slight reptile looked about the room suspiciously. "Are we alone?"

Eliss looked about his office, not quite sure of what to expect. He set down his mug of brinebrew.

"We are," the Professor answered tentatively. "Have a seat," he said, and motioned to a gravcouch opposite where he was sitting.

"Thank you," the alien acknowledged, and slipped into the couch.

"So what can I help you with?" Professor Eliss asked the slim creature.

There was no pause; the caller had come with his appeal already planned. "I ask you to write the truth about my people."

It then occurred to Professor Eliss that he did not even recognize what species his unexpected guest was. He reached for his datapad. "And what *is* your species?" he asked.

"I am Abinyshi," the reptile replied curtly.

Professor Eliss set his datapad down on one of the arms of his chair. "The Abinyshi have been extinct for decades," Eliss said slowly.

"We have been under the servitude of the Empire," the reptile said. "We have been all but wiped out. But a few of us survive, despite Imperial propaganda claiming we destroyed ourselves in some absurd civil conflict."

"I see." The sentientologist was on dangerous ground here, and he suddenly hoped COMPNOR hadn't installed any sort of surveillance devices in his office.

Each of Eliss's hearts skipped a beat.

"All right," he said. "Tell me of your people and I will make sure the truth is told." Eliss looked out over the campus through the office's streaked windows. "I probably won't be here much longer, so I might as well get as much work done as possible." He turned back to face his guest.

"My name is S'itl Thirr," the being began....

The Hunt Within: Valance's Tale

Mission 1: Raid on Picutorion

Long after Luke Skywalker clashed with Valance, records discovered in the Boudolayz archives shed light on Valance's Imperial service.

According to the Boudolayz files, Beilert Valance registered for Imperial service as a native of Shinbone, a hardscrabble mining world in Wild Space, and said he'd lost both parents as a child to the Hardan Plague. After his enlistment, he was sent to the Empire's infamous heavy-gravity Sirpar training center in the Arkanis Sector. He thrived there and was assigned to the sector army of the Outer Rim's volatile Nembus Sector, where he saw extensive action against pirates and Rebel groups. Afterward, he was promoted to sergeant major of his stormtrooper platoon after the pacification of Praadost II. With the Nembus Sector campaign dying down, Valance's legion was assigned to the nearby Kwymar Sector, where his life would take a fateful turn.

The most detailed records concerned his squad's battles to take Rebel-held positions during the Alliance's frantic evacuation from the Outer Rim planet Picutorion. This took place during the Kwymar Suppressions, marked by ruthless Imperial assaults on Picutorion and its Kwymar Sector neighbors Protazk, Doniphon, Kestos Minor and Telos.

As a bounty hunter, Valance first gained notice for apprehending the berserker pirate Alabar Double Ax, whom he'd pursued from Sikurd to the Red Nebula; he confiscated the Sikurdian's ship and renamed it *Kill Switch*. He then assembled a gang of henchmen who helped him rout the Chorran shipjackers operating out of Donadus in the Inner Rim's Bamula Sector and capture a slavers' ring on Thraisai -- missions that established him as an elite hunter.

Valance's employers knew him as a patient stalker who liked to hunt by consulting an array of infochants and rumor brokers, then let his instincts tell him where to intercept his prey. But they learned not to let droids near Valance, or to make inquiries about the grim-faced hunter's past.

Mission 2: Destroying the Past

The Kwymar Suppressions would be Valance's last mission for the Empire. The Picutorion raid was followed by an assault on Doniphon, where Rebel

starfighters strafed the Imperial ground troops. A badly wounded Valance was left at Anglebay Station on Telos 4 to die. The medics there saved his life, but only by replacing half of his body with cybernetic parts.

His Imperial career ruined, Valance became a bounty hunter. Few, if any, knew of his past, though many noted his irrational hatred for mechanicals. A few weeks after *A New Hope*, Valance told his followers that he had a new mission for them -- one he would pay for himself. Their objective: Utterly destroy Anglebay Station. No salvage... and no survivors.

The mission unsettled even the hard cases that made up the *Kill Switch*'s crew. Anglebay Station was neutral in the Galactic Civil War, caring for any patients that came its way, even bounty hunters. But fear of their ruthless boss and greed for his credits kept the hunters silent, and the *Kill Switch* headed up the Hydian Way to the Telos system.

The *Kill Switch*'s first mate, Slssk the Hutlarian, was nearly as feared in some circles as the Hunter himself. When asked if his crew was tough enough to take on a certain foe, Valance liked to nod at Slssk, who would peel off his battle armor to display an orange-skinned torso criss-crossed with white scars and pitted with sucker marks. "Ten years as a gladiator on Loovria didn't kill my first mate," Valance would say. "What makes you think this target stands a chance?" One look at the Hunter's smile and the Hutlarian's blazing red eyes, and Valance usually had his contract.

Slssk was legendary, but tough Hutlarians aren't rare. Hutlar is a dim, chilly little world in the depths of the Mid Rim's Senex sector. For millennia, its natives have served as bodyguards and shock troops for the Senex and Juvex lords.

Mission 3: The Wrong Boy

During the Telos raid, Valance's henchmen overheard a patient babbling about his adventure with Han Solo, the Lepi smuggler Jaxxon, and a boy with a droid - an apparent breakthrough in Valance's quest for the identity of the Death Star's destroyer. Valance's thugs ambushed Jaxxon on Nar Shaddaa, which led them to the Rimworld Aduba-3 and a showdown with Jaxxon, Amaiza Foxtrain and the villagers of Onacra. There, Valance discovered he'd found Jimm Doshun, not Luke Skywalker -- a mistake that almost proved fatal.

Mission 4: The Doom of Ultaar

Valance lost his crew on Aduba-3, but he managed to escape with his life and was soon back on the trail of the Death Star's destroyer. His investigations led him to a new target: a Rebel information-retrieval team secretly based in the jungles of Ultaar.

Mission 5: Showdown on Junction

The raid on Ultaar netted Valance no new information and a new enemy. Darth Vader discovered the Rebel outpost just days after Valance's raid, and learned of the cyborg hunter from a dying Rebel soldier.

Frustrated in his search, Valance traced Rebel supply lines and learned of the Imperial blockade of Yavin. He set up operations on the shadowport of Junction and waited there, biding his time by collecting bounties on the likes of Marko Tyne, a Zygerrian slaver wanted on Thesme for depredations in nine of the sector's systems.

After five weeks, Valance's patience finally paid off: Luke Skywalker and C-3PO arrived on Junction seeking parts to repair a damaged R2-D2. When Valance arrived at Skinker's salvage yard, Luke dove inside the office, pushing C-3PO in front of him, then hustled the droid out the back door. After Valance burned his way in, the stage was set for his confrontation with Luke. But the encounter didn't go quite as Valance had imagined it.

Mission 6: Centares Endgame

C-3PO's willingness to sacrifice himself for his master awakened something in Valance the hunter had thought long gone: hope. Namely, the hope that the galaxy could be a better place where cyborgs aren't ostracized. But the hunter realized he was racing against Darth Vader for the identity of the Death Star's destroyer -- a secret Valance now determined to protect at all costs.

Valance's new quest led him to Tyler Lucian, a deserter who'd fled the Rebel base on Yavin 4 as the Death Star approached and was now hiding in a tower above the deadly acid waters of Centares' Rubyflame Lake. But Vader arrived just minutes after Valance, distracting the hunter long enough for Lucian to lock himself in the tower. There, the deserter watched an epic battle between the bounty hunter and the Lord of the Sith.

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NO DROIDS

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THIS IS THE NEW PALIToy DROID FACTORY! YOU CAN CREATE HUNDREDS OF DIFFERENT LOOKING ROBOTS & YOU CAN EVEN BUILD FIVE AT A TIME!

ARTOO!! COME AWAY FROM THERE BEFORE YOU GET YOURSELF RE-CYCLED!

HERE WE ARE IN THE LAND OF THE JAWAS - ALSO NEW! IT'S A GENUINE LANDSCAPE OF THE PLANET TATOOINE COMPLETE WITH A JAWA SAND-CRAWLER JUST LIKE THE ONE THAT CAPTURED US IN THE FILM!

ER... COME ON, ARTOO - I THINK IT'S TIME WE WERE LEAVING!

ALL AT YOUR
Palitoy®
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WIN A DAY AT THE FILMING OF THE NEW

STAR WARS

'THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK'



GALACTIC GREETINGS EARTH READERS, ARTOO AND I ARE HERE TO TELL YOU ABOUT THE EXCITING PRIZES TO BE WON IN THE GREAT PALITOTY 'DRAW A DROID' COMPETITION

FIRST PRIZE IS A DAY AT ELSTREE STUDIOS TO SEE THEM MAKING 'THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK' & TO MEET SOME OF THE STARS



BEEP!!

IT'LL BE A DAY TO REMEMBER FOR SIX LUCKY WINNERS!!

FOR RUNNERS UP 12 2ND PRIZES OF A PALITOTY LASER RIFLE AND BLASTER PISTOL AND 24 3RD PRIZES OF PALITOTY DIE CAST VEHICLES - X-WING, TIE-FIGHTER, LAND SPEEDER



ALL YOU DO IS DESIGN AND DRAW A 'DROID' AND GIVE IT A NAME (I UNDERSTAND EARTH PEOPLE REFER TO WE DROIDS AS ROBOTS)



BEEP!!

OH MY! ALL THIS EXCITEMENT IS MAKING MY CIRCUITS OVERLOAD...



BEEP!!

DON'T YOU CALL ME A NAMBY-PAMBY ARTOO!

COMPLETE THE COUPON AND SEND IT WITH YOUR DRAWING AND THE RECEIPT FROM ANY PALITOTY STAR WARS PRODUCT YOU HAVE BOUGHT TO THE ADDRESS BELOW LOTS OF STAR WARS MODELS TO CHOOSE FROM, INCLUDING SOME NEW FACES LIKE HAMMERHEAD & GREEN GREEDO!!



HOW TO ENTER

All you have to do is design and draw a droid that you think could be a friend of Artoo Detoo and See Threepio in the next Star Wars film. And then give him a name. Draw your droid in colour or in black and white.

Send your drawing and the droid's name to the address in the coupon, together with some proof of your purchase of a Palitoty Star Wars product from your toyshop. This could be a receipt, clearly marked 'Star Wars', from the shop.

Also make sure you complete the coupon with your name, address and age and send it with your entry.

Palitoty

THE PRIZES

1st prize: Six boys or girls to see the filming of the new Star Wars film, 'The Empire Strikes Back', at Elstree Studios, and meet some of the stars. Winners will also get a complete set of 20 Star Wars figures and a Death Star play centre.

2nd prize: Twelve prizes of a Palitoty laser rifle and blaster pistol.

3rd prize: 24 sets of three die-cast vehicles (X-wing fighter, tie-fighter, land speeder).

The 1st prize winners may be accompanied by one adult on their visit to Elstree Studios.

RULES OF THE COMPETITION

1. The competition is open to all UK residents aged 4 to 14, except children of employees of Palitoty and anyone directly concerned with the competition.

2. Entries must be received on or before 11th May 1979.

3. A toy shop receipt for Palitoty Star Wars purchases must accompany all entries.

4. All entries will be examined and prizes awarded by a panel of judges whose decision shall be final and legally binding. No correspondence can be entered into.

5. Age of entrant will be taken into consideration when judging.

6. Winners will be notified by post. A full list of prize-winners will be sent on request after 28th May 1979.

Post your entry to: 'Draw a Droid', Palitoty Consumer Services, P.O. Box 9, Baker Street, Coalville, Leicester LE6 2DE.

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Please print your name and address.

Name _____

Address _____

Age _____ ST1

NEW FROM THE PALIToy

STAR WARS

COLLECTION!

THESE CHARACTERS ARE AS MEAN AS THEY LOOK! THEY'RE **NEW** IN THE **PALIToy STAR WARS COLLECTION** - ALONG WITH MY DROID BUDDIES BACK HERE AND ME IN MY PILOT'S SUIT!

DEATH STAR DROID

GREEN GREEDO

WALRUS MAN

HAMMERHEAD

SNAGGLE TOOTH

LUKE SKYWALKER

R5 D4

POWER DROID

At your shop now!

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THE PALIToy
**STAR
WARS™**
COLLECTION



THAT'S DARTH VADER'S PERSONAL T.I.E. FIGHTER LOCKED IN COMBAT WITH MASTER LUKE'S X-WING FIGHTER! THE T.I.E. FIGHTERS GOT DETACHABLE WINGS AND A LASER GUN THAT LIGHTS UP! WHO WILL WIN THIS DEADLY DUEL? ONLY YOU KNOW! ONLY YOU CAN CREATE YOUR OWN STAR WARS! OH MY!

Palitoy®

35:8:4/AEN

Alderaan Destroyed by Imperial Terror Weapon

Unspecified Node

This is the first broadcast of the Alderaan Expatriate Network. Our mission is to provide uncensored and reliable news regarding the infamy of the Imperial machine to all citizens of the Republic. Our first duty is to report that all accounts stating that Alderaan was destroyed by her own hand are patently false. She was shattered by an Imperial death machine built by the Emperor and commanded by Grand Moff Tarkin. A remote relay satellite orbiting Delaya recorded the event, and an Alliance operative managed to smuggle the tape out of the system despite the imposition of an immediate Imperial blockade.

Holotapes of Alderaan's destruction, plus transband communications between Alderaan and Delaya regarding the appearance of the battle station, have been forwarded to all Alliance-affiliated NewsNets for further distribution. For those requiring further proof, a holomessage from Imperial Advisor Ars Dangor to all Grand Moffs that makes reference to the Death Star is appended. It was not intended for public distribution, and therefore dispenses with the flowery words of order and law that typify New Order propaganda, and makes an honest appeal for rule through fear and intimidation.

Those who have despaired of putting down the tyranny of the Emperor should find new hope in the knowledge that the Death Star was destroyed by the heroic men and women of the Alliance before it could strike again. AEN urges all freedom-loving citizens to rise up in opposition to the Empire. Your fellow citizens are dying and being enslaved. Fight while you have freedom. We will continue broadcasts on this node as long as possible. Remember Alderaan!

Alderaan Expatriate Network

35:8:8/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Chandрила Faces Uncertain Future

Nar Shaddaa Node

Fast on the heels of the arrest of Chandрила's former Senator Canna Omonda comes news that Palpatine was heard to remark that if sending up two traitors in a row is how Chandрила rewards him for his favor, it might benefit from more direct supervision. Since the wish of the Emperor is the command of his toadies, we strongly suggest that if you have any holdings on Chandрила, you might want to divest yourself of them.

This may come to nothing. The Empire has as a rule been fairly low-key in enforcing its will in the Core. But then there's Ralltiir. And Alderaan. Things may be changing in the Core. Stay alert.

Cynabar's InfoNet

35:8:16/IHV/G7H4/PAN.3.TAA/GEN

Supply Ship Crashes, Destroys Mining Camp

Pendath, Taanab

The Imperial Navy regrets to announce that unusual solar activity caused the crash of the supply ship *Ambitious* at the B'Knos mining colony in the Abran asteroid belt. The resulting explosion claimed the lives of all miners at the colony.

Due to the unusual mineralogical composition of the asteroid belt, and the proximity of the nearby star, Abran, navigational systems aboard the *Ambitious* were rendered inoperative.

Captain Vin Freen, the commanding officer of the *Ambitious*, has been posthumously recognized for his efforts to avert the disaster. According to the supply ship's flight recorder, Freen valiantly attempted to destroy his own vessel before it crashed into the mining camp, although the failure of all ship systems thwarted the captain's efforts.

— Imperial HoloVision

35:8:17/COL/BET.5.ALT/ECO

Insect Plague Threatens Bethal's Future

Altoona, Bethal

The greddleback bug infestation on Bethal has grown very serious since the presence of the giant termites on the planet was discovered 12 weeks ago. Steps to contain the swarm to Altoona Prefecture have failed, and over 200 greddleback swarms are now estimated to be migrating across the southern continent at a rate of six kilometers a day, each leaving in its wake a broad swath of devastated vegetation. A swarm is estimated to contain roughly six million of the five centimeter long insects.

The insects pose no direct threat to the populations of affected regions, according to pest control experts, though the swarms are proving to be a major nuisance as they clog air intakes, vents, and infest buildings.

The great danger is to the economy of Bethal. The major export item of the planet is apocia hardwood timber, used primarily in the construction of luxury furniture. Apocia trees are very vulnerable to greddleback attack, and tree farmers worry that this outbreak may utterly devastate their industry for generations to come. "Apocia trees take over 200 years to mature," said Rall Teedra, head of Bethal's Commerce Council. "By planting new saplings every year for future genera-

tions, we ensure at least one new harvest every decade. But if the bugs take out our crops at every maturation level, well, there won't be another harvest for at least 300 years. That would pretty much put Bethal out of business."

Pest control experts are considering initiating an aggressive slash and burn program over a 6,000 kilometer area to contain the swarms to the Altoona and Dora Prefectures. This desperate measure is being resisted by farmers in the two regions who have yet to lose their crops, but Bethal AgriCorp, the major planetary cooperative, is reportedly considering the option seriously.

The greddleback bugs are thought to have arrived on planet in an undeclared cargo of hanava fruit carried by a freighter that landed at Altoona Spaceport.

Colonial News Nets

Navy Reports Super-Weapon Destroyed Alderaan

Imperial City, Coruscant

The Imperial Navy today announced that a battle station code-named Death Star was responsible for the destruction of Alderaan, and not, as previously had been speculated, an internal rupturing of the planet's crust.

Admiral Kemel Trowe, speaking for NAVCOR Command, said that the station had destroyed Alderaan at the Emperor's command, after the Empire obtained irrefutable evidence that the ostensibly peaceful world had been pursuing an aggressive biowar program. "Obviously, we would have preferred to handle this situation in a far less drastic manner," Trowe said. "But as far as we could determine, Bail Organa's biowar program was on the verge of a major breakthrough. Once we discovered Organa's affiliation with the Rebel movement, we could not allow even one vial of biowar product offplanet. Even now, we cannot be sure that we were in time to prevent the exportation of dangerous microbes and diseases to offworld Rebel cells."

Trowe refused to comment on the current status or location of the Death Star, which is rumored to be either destroyed or somewhere in the Outer Rim. "Peace-loving citizens have nothing to fear from our Empire," he said in closing. "But all should know that worlds which rise to defy the order and law of the Empire have everything to lose, as Alderaan learned to its sorrow. This has not changed."

Imperial HoloVision

A LONG TIME AGO,
IN A GALAXY FAR,
FAR AWAY...

THE REBEL ALLIANCE FRIGATE **REDEMPTION** IS RETURNING
FROM THE PLANET **MORTON** AFTER MAKING A SUPPLY RUN.

PICKING UP A **DISTRESS CALL** WHILE
IN **HYPERSPACE**, HER CREW DECIDES
TO INVESTIGATE FURTHER...

LEIA'S TRUST

WHATEVER
HAPPENED HERE,
IT LOOKS IT WAS ONE
HECK OF A
FIGHT.

WRITER MARTIN FISHER ARTIST BOB MOLESWORTH COLOURS DIGIKORE LETTERER: DAVID LEACH

THE LAST
THING WE NEED RIGHT
NOW IS **ANOTHER BATTLE,**
COMMANDER.

HAVE YOU
LOCATED THE
SOURCE OF
THE DISTRESS
BEACON?

IT APPEARS
TO BE AN **IMPERIAL**
ESCAPE POD,
YOUR HIGHNESS.
ONE LIFEFORM
ON BOARD.

ARE THERE ANY
OTHER **IMPERIAL CRAFT**
WITHIN **SCANNER**
RANGE?

NO,
BUT I
HAVE A VERY
BAD FEELING
ABOUT
THIS.

IT COULD
BE A **DECEPTION...**
SOME SORT
OF **TRAP.**

WHICHEVER SIDE THEY'RE ON,
I **WON'T** LEAVE THEM OUT
THERE TO **DIE.**

BRING THE
POD INTO THE
LANDING
BAY.

LET'S
SEE WHO'S
INSIDE.













LORD VADER, WE'VE LOCATED COMMANDER DUNER'S ESCAPE POD.

BRING IT ABOARD IMMEDIATELY, AND INFORM THE EMPEROR OF OUR SUCCESS.

YOU ARE ALONE, COMMANDER. WHERE IS THE PRINCESS?

LORD VADER, IT'S NOT MY FAULT. THE REBELS INSTALLED AN ARTIFICIAL LIFE-SIGNS GENERATOR...

I'M SORRY, MY LORD. I PROMISE I WON'T LET YOU DOWN AGAIN. GIVE ME ONE MORE CHANCE!!

MOST DISAPPOINTING.

I DO
NOT GIVE SECOND
CHANCES.

AND YOUR
APOLOGY IS NOT
ACCEPTED.

RUMBLE.

GGWARRK!

THE END.

Silver and Scarlet

“Seddia Chaan,” the guard said, repeating the name on my identification papers.

“Yes,” I lied.

He handed the papers back, nodded his massive green-grey head, and stepped aside. I tried for the cool, polite smile I imagined a high-level arms manufacturer would spare to a doorman and walked into the club. After the heat and humidity, stepping into the cool, dry air was like arriving on another world. Oolan was a barge city on an open sea, its buildings linked by bridges and separated by canals in a constantly shifting architecture. This month, the currents had taken it north, almost to the planetary equator. Next, it might drift south until blue-green ice pounded against the buildings’ foundations and frost covered the bridges’ handrails. By then, I planned to be back with the rebel fleet, deliveries made and my latest false-self a fading memory. If I was still in Oolan tomorrow, it would mean something unexpected had happened.

Given my track record, it could go either way.

The private club was built as a single wide circular room with windows three meters high at the outer edge. At the center, a hub of black made up the private meeting rooms and lifts to the upper levels. A recording of Bith harp music filled the air, the reproduction so clean the notes felt like they had edges. Outside the great windows, the city curved up, shifted, fell away, then curved up again, carried by the ocean swell. A dozen brightly colored skimmers buzzed along the canal, the human and Quarren drivers seemingly in competition to see who could be the most reckless.

I tugged down on the hem of my jacket and looked around casually at the dozen or so club members lounging at tables and couches. The man I was looking for was human, older, and I’d only seen pictures and holograms of him. Trying to seem nonchalant, I touched my comlink.

“Elfour?”

“Ma'am,” the droid’s deep, gravelly voice came.

“How sure are we that he’s here?”

“Ninety-six percent certainty.”

“Okay, so run down that last four percent for me.”

“The general might have been discovered, and the individual who rode his flyer down from the orbital base might have been an impostor,” my lookout droid said. “Trouble inside, ma’am?”

“Just trying to find him. Let me take another pass,” I said, and dropped the connection. Seddia Chaan, security engineer for the Salantech Cooperative, would have marched around the room with the crisp, studied movement and impassive expression of the ex-military operative that she was. Since I was playing her, I faked it. A serving droid floated over to me and asked in a carefully designed voice whether it could bring me anything to drink. Seddia Chaan didn’t use intoxicants, so I asked for tea. The men and women at the tables and couches glanced at me and then away, polite and distant in a way that would have told me I was at the heart of the Empire even if I’d woken up there with my mind blanked.

I’d started the operation months before, following a rumor that the warden of an Imperial political prison might have been growing sympathetic to some of his prisoners. It had taken weeks to run down, since it wasn’t an Imperial warden, there wasn’t a prison involved, and General Cascaan didn’t actually have much sympathy for the rebellion. But apart from every single bit of information being wrong, things had gone pretty well. I’d tracked Cascaan to the Entiia system, found his clandestine lover in Oolan, and opened negotiations. The whole process had been about as safe and certain as balancing a Verdorian fire rat on my nose, but I’d managed it, all except the last part. The actual meeting and exchange.

I was on my third pass around the room and almost done with my cup of tea when I recognized him. He was sitting alone at a small, high table almost against the window. His hand was pressed to his mouth, his gaze fixed on the glittering crystal-and-silver of the complex across the canal from us. Once I spotted him, I could forgive myself for not recognizing him at once. All the pictures I’d seen had been of a straight-backed, high-chinned man with bright black eyes and a challenging glare. The man at the table was slumped over. His dark skin had an ashen tone, and his eyes were wet and rheumy. When he

shifted in his seat, I could see the physical power in his body, but when he was still, he looked like someone's grandpa.

In my work, I'd seen the whole spectrum of betrayers, from the ones who were afraid of getting caught to those who were excited by being naughty to others for whom it was just business. The man at the table wasn't any of those. He looked sickened by it. That was bad. I put on Seddia Chaan's cool smile and started over.

"Ma'am?" L4-3P0 said.

"It's all right, I found him."

"We have another problem. A flyer has landed on the tower's upper pad. Registration identifies it as the private craft of Nuuiian Sulannis."

"Maybe he's a club member," I said, not breaking stride.

"The chances of the Imperial interrogator who has been investigating the general arriving at the meeting by coincidence are —"

"I was joking, sweetie. Thank you for the warning. Talk to the club's computer system if you can, and try to slow him down. I'll be quick."

"Yes, ma'am."

I slid into the chair across from Cascaan. He looked up, and for a moment surprise registered in his eyes. Then a slow, rueful smile. "You're Hark, then?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"I was expecting a man."

"That's a common prejudice," I said. "I won't take it personally."

I plucked the credit chit out of my jacket pocket and placed it on the table. The black tabletop made the silver chit seem brighter than it was. The general scowled at it and took a red-enameled memory crystal from his pocket. I waited, forcing my body to stay relaxed and calm while the sense of the chief interrogator landing his ship five levels above me crawled up my spine.

"I take it those are the plans we discussed?" I said, trying to make it sound casual and still keep the ball rolling.

The general scowled and nodded at the same time. The grip of his finger and thumb on the memory crystal didn't relax. I had the sense that if I'd reached out for it, he'd pluck it away from me. When he spoke, his voice was low and precise.

"Have you ever betrayed something?"

I felt my heart drop into my belly. Last-minute changes of heart were always a hazard in this kind of operation. Usually, I could budget a few hours to get the target drunk and maudlin, sing a few songs about glory and lost love, and pretty much provide whatever handholding and consolation they needed to make the exchange. This was not one of those times. If he decided to turn me down, the plans for the next-generation Star Destroyers would fade away from me like smoke in a fist. Also, I'd probably get killed. Not the outcomes I was aiming for.

"I have, but not lightly," I said. "I always had my reasons."

"Do you regret them? Your betrayals?"

"No."

He dropped the memory crystal into his palm and closed his fist around it. There were tears in his eyes. In other circumstances, I would have found the gesture less frustrating.

"I have been a loyal subject of the Emperor. I have followed the orders of my commanders. I told myself we were bringing order to the galaxy because that was what they told us. Who was I to disagree?"

I leaned forward and put my hand gently on his wrist. "I understand," I said.

"If we do this thing," Cascaan said, "I will be responsible for the deaths of thousands of soldiers."

“And if we don’t? How many people will die if we call the whole thing off? And will they be soldiers, or innocent people who happen to live on worlds the Emperor has decided don’t pay him enough respect?”

“No one else has access to these. When they get out, it will be known that I have turned against them. They will slaughter me for this.”

His fingers didn’t loosen their grip. I switched tack, taking my hand off his and tapping the silver chit. “There is enough money on this to make you safe. You’ll be able to fade into the Rim, find a quiet spot, a new name. A new face. You’ll be all right.”

“Will I, Hark? Does my conscience count for nothing?”

Don’t rush him, I told myself. He’s already halfway to spooked, and if you hurry him, he’s just going to freeze up. I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, made my shoulders relax and my expression soften. The serving droid hissed up to my left with a fresh cup of tea. The city outside the windows rose and fell.

I had maybe two minutes.

“Of course it counts,” I said. “I’m getting the sense, sir, that there’s something you want to tell me.”

“You know I commanded the assault on Buruunin.”

“I do,” I said. “I lost people I cared about in that attack.”

“The cities were undefended,” he said. “As soon as we received the order for the bombardment, I knew I would have to betray my Emperor. My Empire. Those deaths brought no order. Only fear. They were wrong.”

“Didn’t call off the attack, though,” I said, more sharply than I should have. He didn’t flinch or tighten his grip on the plans.

“It would have made no difference. I would have been executed, and my second in command would have given the order. Insubordination is a fool’s way to die. I have my honor, but I am not a fool.”

I had maybe a minute and a half. This wasn’t going well.

"Afterward," General Cascaan said, "there were any number of collaborators. They came to every outpost we made, mewling and crying, telling us that they had information for sale. Where the rebels were hiding, who had aided them, where their caches of weapons were. For a few credits, they would have informed on their mothers."

"They were desperate," I said. "They were afraid."

He turned to look at me straight on. I hadn't realized until now that he'd been avoiding my eyes. There was a pain in his expression that took my breath away. I'd been working underground for a long time, and somewhere along the way, I'd let Cascaan and men like him turn into a kind of faceless enemy to me. Well, here was his face, and the foursquare leader of soldiers wasn't in him.

"I am desperate," he said softly. "I am afraid. Those people I despised — and I despised them, Hark — I have now become. I am selling the trust I have been given for money. For safety. For the beautiful lie that I can be a better man by making this devil's bargain."

"They were refugees of a planet-wide military attack. You're one of the most powerful men in the Empire," I said. "Seems to me, you're in a kind of a different position."

"And does that speak better of me? Or worse?"

"Better," I said, mostly because it seemed like the answer most likely to get him to open his fingers. I wondered, if I lunged for him, if I'd be able to get the plans and run out the door before anyone tackled me. It didn't seem likely. And if I told him we were both about to get arrested by the Empire, I didn't like my chances for moving the process forward.

"I disagree," the general said. "This trade is ignoble. It leaves me no better than them. I cannot take your money."

He was backing out. My comlink chimed. Grimacing, I touched it. "Bad time, Elfour. Kind of in the middle of something."

"Ma'am, I have done all that I could. That... situation will require your attention."

Cascaan had opened his grip. The red enamel caught the light from the window, shining in his palm like he was cupping a handful of blood. I looked over to the dark wall of private rooms and lifts at the club's center.

Time for plan C.

"Can you hold that thought?" I said, holding up a finger. "I'll be right back."

I walked toward the lifts, thinking through all the ways this could go and how I could affect which one actually happened. The serving droid swooped in to see if I wanted something for my tea, and I waved it away. I couldn't tell if my unsteadiness was the adrenaline or if the city had hit some bigger waves than usual.

"Elfour," I said to my comlink. "Do we know where he is?"

"Interrogator Sulannis is in the lift, coming toward the main floor, ma'am."

"Can we shut down the lift?"

"I have already done so once, ma'am. He is using his security override. I am locked out."

A whole host of solutions crumbled and died. On the one hand, less to think about. On the other, they were the ones I liked best. I was over halfway to the center. "Which lift is he in?"

To my right, a lift door slid open and an older Quarren woman stepped out. Not Sulannis.

"Elfour, which lift is he in?"

"Querying, ma'am."

"Sooner's better."

"Six."

I angled off to my left, not running but walking faster. My choices were getting thin quickly. The coppery taste of panic filled my mouth, and I ignored it.

The lift doors were black enamel and smooth as a mirror. I made my reflection look calm, prim, maybe a little bored. The difference between safe and too late was going to be seconds. The doors shuddered and slid open. Nuuiian Sulannis stood in the lift car, the light seeming to fall into his black uniform like it was woven out of black holes. He started to step out, and I faked my way in front of him, then corrected when he did, making it into a little dance of awkwardness and social misstep. His scowl could have peeled the shell off a Keeb beetle.

“Sorry,” I said. And then, “Aren’t you Interrogator Sulannis?”

He had time to register surprise and I planted a straight kick just above his pelvis. The blow was designed to stagger him back, and it worked. The lift doors slid closed and I slipped between them as he regained his balance. I pushed the controls for the landing pad.

Close quarters fighting, especially when the opponent was so much bigger than me, meant grappling techniques. I started with an elbow lock, but he shrugged it off through equal part luck and brute strength. He hit me twice in the ribs, but the cramped lift car made it hard to get much power behind the blows, giving me the opportunity for a leg sweep that took him down. Once I got my arm around his neck, it was over, but the choke took long, terrible seconds to take effect. When he finally went limp under me, we were already at the landing pad. I hit the controls to take me back down before anyone could see a disheveled weapons engineer straddling the unconscious body of an Imperial interrogator.

I had one dose of sedative left in my shoe. I used it on him, stopped the car on the third level, dragged Sulannis to the women’s room and propped him in a stall. All in all, it took less than five minutes.

On the way back down, I tugged my costume back into place, smoothing out the wrinkles while I tried to think how to coax the general back into making the trade. As soon as the lift doors opened, I knew it was over. The little table we’d been sitting at was empty. Cascaan was nowhere I could see. Little wisps of steam wafted from my cup of tea as I came close. The sinking in my gut was disappointment and anger and frustration, but there was something else, too.

Some part of my mind that told me I was missing something. This wasn't what it looked like.

"Ma'am?" L4-3P0 said on my comlink. "Is all well?"

On the black table, the silver chit with Cascaan's payment glowed. Beside it, the bright red of the memory crystal. He'd left the plans and the payment too. He was going to get caught, and he knew it, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

When I looked up, he was there. Outside the window, walking across the canal bridge and away from me.

His back was straight and proud, his head high. It was the first time he'd seemed like the man from the holograms. A warrior, ready to fight. Ready to die.

I scooped up silver and red and put them in my pocket before I touched my comlink. "Time to go. Get the skimmer warmed up, and let's get back to the ship. We need to be out of here before Sulannis wakes up."

"Yes, ma'am," the droid said. "May I ask whether you got what you came for?"

"I did," I said.

"And the general?"

Cascaan reached the other side of the bridge, turned right, and stepped out of my line of sight.

"He did too."

35:9:1/IHV/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Mothma, Organa Appear on Imperial Arrest List

Imperial City, Coruscant

For the first time in Imperial history, two former Imperial Senators have appeared on the *Imperial Enforcement DataCore*, the listing of wanted criminals released quarterly by the Imperial Office of Criminal Investigations. Senator

nals released quarterly by the Imperial Office of Criminal Investigations. Senator



Mon Mothma of Chandrila and Senator Leia Organa of Alderaan have been

positively identified as key figures in the Rebel Alliance command hierarchy. This treasonous crime against the Empire is punishable by death, and those so accused and at large are automati-

cally placed on the Imperial Remandation List.

Mothma, a long-time political enemy of Emperor Palpatine, has never disguised her Rebel sympathies, and resigned her post as representative of Chandrila several years ago, ostensibly to enter a voluntary exile. Instead she disappeared. It has since been discovered that she has spent the last year in clandestine meetings with Bail Organa, Jan Dodonna, Keenel Dene, Bel Iblis (who will likely be joining his co-conspirators on the list soon), and other Rebel leaders, supervising the final transition of their outlaw political party into a paramilitary organization.

Organa was identified as a Rebel conspirator and spy by Darth Vader and arrested, but escaped before she could be brought to trial. She is known to have participated in sabotage efforts and terrorist activities which have resulted in thousands of deaths.

Curiously, Mothma and Organa are among the youngest Senators ever elected to the Imperial Senate.

Imperial HoloVision

THE TRAP AT YAVIN 4

After the destruction of the first Galactic Empire's Death Star by the forces of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, a number of escape pods and shuttles that had escaped from the Death Star's destruction, crashed on Yavin 4. The survivors, including Colonel Maximilian Veers were scattered around the planet, cut off from reinforcements by Alliance forces.

Imperial Commander Brenn Tantor was sent to rescue the colonel. He landed his troops in the jungle and deployed his forces to flank the Rebels.

The Rebel troopers regained their ground and engaged the stormtroopers in firefights throughout the jungle. After fighting through the Rebel forces, Tantor rescued Colonel Veers and then extracted his forces, leaving a destroyed Rebel outpost in his wake.

The Rebellion continued to occupy its posts on Yavin 4, though it would lose much of the base in the subsequent battles. Tantor would move onto other battlefronts, and Veers would spearhead the production of the All Terrain Armored Transport.

EVACUATION OF YAVIN

"The surprise is mine, bucketheads!"

—Jan Dodonna before the destruction of the main base

Rebel forces under Admiral Gial Ackbar engaged Imperial ships at three locations—Kli'aar, Pinoora, and the Vallusk Cluster—in order to trick the Imperial blockade into diverting ships to reinforce the attacked positions, leaving a space open for the Rebel fleet to go into hyperspace.

However, the completed *Executor* finally arrived at Yavin 4 with Lord Vader's Death Squadron fleet, as well as elements of the personal fleet of Baron Tagge, and the battle began. TIE/LN starfighter and scouts on 74-Z speeder bikes scoured the moon for stragglers.

Survivors of the Death Star combined their ranks and moved against the Rebel's main base. Imperial All Terrain Scout Transports, stormtroopers, shock troopers, scout troopers, and Imperial Army pilots fought against Rebel troopers, snipers, Wookiee soldiers, and vanguard divisions around a set of ruins and a Fountain near the base. The Rebels defeated those forces, buying time for the evacuation. General Dodonna ordered the base's fighters and transports to escape though he refused to evacuate himself until everyone had left.

The Rebel operatives X2 and Shara fought against Imperial forces during the battle. X2 helped destroy a TX-130T fighter tank, and went into the base to activate the evacuation signal. A TIE bomber blew the comm tower, though,

and X2 was forced activate turrets to destroy the bombers, then went out to repair the tower. X2 took a T4-B heavy tank to make his way to the waterfall. He then used his Force powers to jump to the top of the tower and used a fusioncutter to repair the tower. He then took control of an anti-air gun to defend the tower from more bombers. X2 then retreated to the hangar and took an X-wing starfighter.

"Keep moving, commander. We will need to eliminate any lingering rebels."

—Darth Vader

After the evacuation order had been given, a smaller Imperial force had pushed their way through to the Massassi Temple. However, Commander Col Serra and his newly created fighting force, Renegade Squadron, pushed back the Imperials and set up a perimeter to keep the Imperials busy while the evacuation proceeded. The door to the temple jammed, so a jetpack-equipped Squadron member jumped through a hole and repaired the door, as well as a turret to defend the temple. Another TX-130T fighter tank then arrived, and Serra ordered the squadron to destroy it. The group then captured a position near the Pyramid, killing at least four stormtroopers. A scout trooper managed to steal communication logs from the Temple, and the Squadron hunted the trooper and recovered the logs. Serra then ordered the Squadron to destroy three Data Banks with sensitive information to prevent them from falling into Imperial hands before escaping.

Dodonna had planted several concussion charges, which decimated a whole squadron of TIE Interdictors as they attacked the Temple. It was believed that the General had died in action, though it was later revealed he had been captured and imprisoned in the Star Dreadnought and prison *Lusankya*. A mind-scan conducted on the captive officer revealed the Rebel's plan to attack the agriworld Reytha.

Over the moon, X2 joined with Commander Serra and took out a communications array on a Star Destroyer to prevent reinforcements from being called in. They then boarded the ship, and X2 sabotaged the reactor core. The two escaped before the ship blew.

The evacuated Rebels rendezvoused in orbit to run the blockade. Vader, on-board his flagship, deliberately left a weak spot in the blockade to try to trap Luke Skywalker, the pilot who had destroyed the Death Star. The Rebel fleet

moved within range of the *Executor*, but Admiral Amise Griff, commanding three Star Destroyers, made a hyperspace jump to cover the hole, and his three starships crashed into Vader's flagship, allowing the Rebels an instant in which to escape into hyperspace.

Meanwhile, Commander Keyan Farlander, having been reassigned from the *Independence* to the *Defiance* to aid in the evacuation of the Rebels, was commissioned to fly an R-22 Spearhead under the call sign of *Red 1* to escort the five CR90 Corvette group *Crescent*, which had been carrying the last of the evacuated staff from Yavin. Upon arriving from hyperspace to the Frigate's rendezvous point, while verifying the location of the corvettes from his inflight map, Farlander noticed a squadron of Imperial *Alpha*-class Xg-1 Star Wing Assault Gunboats attacking a group of four supply freighters 16 kilometers away. As he was too far away from them to save them in time (due to their shields already failing) as well as his immediate orders being to guard the corvettes, he let them be destroyed. He then reviewed his mission start-up procedures and cycled through the corvettes to inspect their contents, before assigning the lead ship to memory. Farlander then increased his own shields to maximum, just in time for the Nebulon-B Frigate *Red Wind* exit hyperspace from 10 kilometers away. The *Red Wind* then proceeded to launch two TIE/LN starfighters from Eta squadron, and four TIE/sa bombers. Farlander then went after the TIE Bombers, also intercepting several TIE fighters (including doing hull damage to the TIE fighter *Eta 1*). He kept his focus on the TIE bombers, viewing them as the priority threat. Afterwards, the *Red Wind* launched Beta Squadron of TIE Bombers. He also had to evade the *Red Wind*'s gunners while tailing the bombers, due to being in close proximity to the frigate. Farlander then continued to defend Rebel transports as they reached one hyperspace jump point, and was eventually assisted by the arrival of Blue Squadron.

"Luke Skywalker had done the impossible; the Death Star was destroyed. But the Empire would not take such a blow lightly. The counter attack on Yavin 4 hit us like lightning. The Alliance would have to evacuate, or be wiped out."

—X2

Rogue Squadron: Ison Corridor Ambush

"We're almost out of this mess. If we can just make it through this nebula, we're all clear."

"I've got a bad feeling about this."

—The *Redemption*'s Captain and Luke Skywalker during the ambush

After the evacuation of Alliance High Command from the Rebel base at Yavin 4 two convoys were directed to rendezvous in the Ison Corridor. Upon arrival, though, the first convoy was wiped out by an *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer that was previously hidden in a nebula, although it came at the cost of said Star Destroyer.

The second convoy, led by the frigate *Redemption*, and consisting of six GR-75 medium transports escorted by three T-65B X-wing starfighters, arrived to discover the area littered with ruined ship parts. The frigate's Captain realized they had to move through the debris field before escaping.^[4] Suddenly, squadrons of TIE fighters ambushed the convoy from three different directions.

At the start of the battle, Red Leader Luke Skywalker noticed an object within some space debris. Temporarily leaving the battle, he managed to find an advanced proton torpedo tech upgrade before returning to defend the transports.

Because of the agility of the TIE Interceptors, the Rebels had to switch to a faster craft than their X-wings, which incited Red Squadron's first use of A-wings in battle. Skywalker docked with the frigate and took control of an A-wing.

Then, once the Interceptors were destroyed, the convoy had to move through a nebula before they could jump to hyperspace and escape. The convoy moved into the nebula, and more TIE Fighters and TIE Interceptors attacked them through the dim lights of the nebula. The Rebel pilots managed to destroy all nearby TIE fighter squadrons, although they needed to use their targeting computers to do so under Luke's command beforehand.

Red Squadron was able to protect all the transports, although the frigate *Redemption* did suffer some moderate damage, but nevertheless the convoy reached Echo Base on Hoth.

The Most Dangerous Foe

"Deen, tell me a story!"

"All right, Mavis, what kind do you want?" Deen Voorson settled his back against the bulkhead. The star cruiser *Republic's Return* had been assigned to evacuate command and technical personnel from Yavin Base. Deen had offered to settle the crew members' children in their quarters while they were on bridge duty.

"Tell me a story about a dragon," said Mavis, nestling into Deen's lap.

"Oh, no," said Mavis' brother Tarn, hanging out of his bunk into the aisle. "Not another dragon story. Too scary -- they keep her up at night."

"Not all dragon stories are scary," countered Deen. "And not all dragons are scary."

"They look scary," put in another child.

"But things aren't always what they seem," Deen said. "Let me tell you a story my grandmother used to tell me, that happened far, far away and long ago ..."

"How long ago?" asked Tarn.

"A million, zillion years?" asked Mavis.

Deen laughed. "Not that long, Mavis. More like a few thousand years. Back in the high times of the Old Republic, when the Jedi Knights were the defenders of peace and justice..."

* * *

"Mistress Tannis -- it's finished."

"Let me see."

Sixteen-year-old Vici Ramunee assumed the salute stance and thumbed the activation switch on her lightsaber. A shaft of light leapt up between her hands. Mistress Tannis smiled in approval, her indigo eyes sparkling.

"Very good, Vici," said the Omwati. "Your lightsaber is an extension of your mind and a bridge between you and the Force. Use it carefully, as you would any of your other skills, and never draw it in anger."

Vici bowed and, quenching its flame, returned the lightsaber's haft to her belt. "Mistress," she said, "am -- am I a Jedi now?"

The blue-skinned Jedi teacher laughed, a tinkling silver sound. "Always the eager one, aren't you Vici. Patience. One would think the three years you've spent here at the Praxeum have been a lifetime -- but the time for you to return to your homeworld is sooner than you think. Tomorrow you will face one final test, and once you have completed it -- then you will be a Jedi."

Vici's brow wrinkled. "What sort of test, Mistress? And what if I fail?"

Mistress Tannis shook her head, her feathery white hair rippling over her shoulders. "Do not think of failure."

Vici met her teacher at the Praxeum gate shortly before dawn. "You will have from sunrise today to sunrise tomorrow morning to complete your quest, Vici," Tannis said. "As the day breaks, you will head north, into the forest, where you will find the river that will guide you. By nightfall you will be at the foot of the mountains. Travel up the river valley until you reach the Cave of Truth, where Jedi have been tested for thousands of years."

Vici, shivering from cold and excitement, tried to remain still, remembering that a Jedi should not feel the chill and a Jedi stays calm.

"When you succeed in this quest," Tannis continued, "you will be a Jedi Knight. You will have faced your most dangerous foe and triumphed."

"What foe?" Vici asked, startled. Tannis had never told her she was going to have to fight anyone.

Tannis simply smiled and shook her head. "That is for you to learn, child. Now empty your pouch, Vici, the sun will be up in moments and you are to carry nothing with you on your journey."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. No food, water, or tools. All you will need you will find in the Force. And do not trust your physical senses -- they will deceive you."

"Must I leave my lightsaber'?" Vici asked.

"With your other tools, yes," said Tannis. She watched Vici lay it aside. "You may keep your jewelry," she said as the girl started to remove it.

Thanks, Vici thought, I'll just whack my enemy in the head with my necklace! What's the point of building a lightsaber if you don't use it?

"Use the Force to protect you," said Tannis. Vici started, wondering if the Jedi Master could read her thoughts. "With the Force as your ally, you may overcome all things," Tannis said. "Now go."

As the blue-white sun rippled over the horizon, Vici turned one last time to her teacher. "Mistress Tannis," she said, "what if I fail?"

"The Force is with you. Do not think of failure."

Vici found the river easily and followed it north through the woods. The day warmed quickly as the sun rose, and Vici found herself enjoying her walk. The straight gray trunks of trees rising to a ruffly blue-green canopy overhead reminded her of home; the crunching of leaves under her feet and the calling of birds in the treetops brought back memories of combing the uplands along Lir Lake, gathering t'il blossoms with her parents. Now the leaves were brighter, crisper, with every color and shape impressed into her senses, and the birds seemed somehow more alive -- she knew where each one sat without looking, knew the message of each song without pausing to think. The Force drew Vici together with the forest, as if there were no divisions between them, and she gloried in it.

By mid-day, however, Vici was hungry. She knelt to drink from the stream; the water was cold, clear, and fresh as any at home. Knowing that she had to keep on if she were to reach her destination in time, Vici planned to rest for only a few moments.

In stillness Vici suddenly became aware of the presence of a human searching through the forest. "Who's there?" she called aloud. The person was coming closer, and searching for her, she was certain. Vici wondered if this were her

enemy come to challenge her already. She leapt to her feet, tensed and ready, reaching out through the Force. *He's looking for me*, she thought, *he's nervous, he's not coming to fight me, he's...*

"Veni!" she cried, spotting her 10-year-old brother scrambling along the river bank. "Veni Ramunee, what are you doing here?" "I didn't want you to be alone!" the boy said, splashing to her through the creek. "I was hiding just inside the gate this morning. I heard what Mistress Tannis said, about you having to meet a dangerous enemy. and I didn't want you to have to do it all by yourself. And I brought you this." He held out Vici's lightsaber. Vici rolled her eyes and sighed. Veni, who had only come to the Jedi Praxeum that year, was utterly devoted to his elder sister. Sometimes too devoted.

"Veni, the whole point of this test is that I do it alone! Now go back to your classes."

"But Vici," said the boy, "I wanna come with you. And ... and I don't know how to get back. I might get lost. I gotta stay with you." "You're j just saying that so I'll let you stay -- you won't get lost and you know it. You just follow the river, then you turn east when the woods get thin, and find your way back to the Praxeum by sensing the others' presence."

"I don't know how to do that yet!" protested Veni. "I have to come with you!"

Vici gave up. "All right, kid, you can come with me as far as the cave, but no farther! You'll have to wait outside when I go in."

Veni grinned. "Here," he said, "take your lightsaber."

"No," said Vici, "Mistress Tannis told me not to bring it."

"Well, what do I do with it?"

"You carry it -- don't try to use it," Vici added quickly, seeing the excitement in the boy's eyes, "just hang it on your belt. Now come on, we have a long way to go."

A few minutes later, Veni said, "Are you hungry, Vici? I made a sandwich. I, uh, took a few bites off it, but you can have ..."

"Finish it yourself," she said.

"All right."

"Are we nearly there?" Veni asked as the sun began to descend.

"We're getting closer," said Vici. "The trees are thinning out and the ground is rising. Mistress Tannis said the cave was at the end of a valley in the mountains."

"Can't we rest? I'm tired. Are we supposed to walk all day and all night?"

"You're not supposed to be here at all, kid. You wanted to come, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Veni sighed. "But can't we rest?"

"You can do whatever you like. I'm looking for the cave."

Veni sighed again but kept trudging along beside his sister. Vici felt sorry for the boy, but she reminded herself it was his own fault -- nobody had made him follow her.

"I'm hungry," Veni said.

"Tough. You ate the sandwich." *Also his fault*, Vici thought, though it didn't make her feel any less concerned for him. The boy's complaints were bringing her own discomfort to her attention as well. She too was tired and hungry, and caught in a state between eagerness to reach the goal of her journey and fear of what she might find. *A Jedi is centered*, she told herself, *a Jedi feels no extremes. Hunger and weariness are only of the body; a Jedi's strength flows from the Force*. It grew harder, though, for her to will away her exhaustion as the path grew steeper and the ground more rocky. Still she kept on, and her brother followed behind her.

By late afternoon, Vici and Veni had climbed well past the tree line. The valley seemed lifeless except for a few tufts of flowering vende and clusters of spiny planimals nestled against the eastern wall of the canyon to catch the last rays of the sun. By dawn they would have crept by moonlight to the west side of the valley, to absorb the light of dawn; Vici watched their tiny photoreceptors glittering in the sunset like jewels hidden in pin cushions.

"What's that?" she hissed abruptly, halting in mid-stride.

"What's what?" responded Veni, bumping into her.

"Listen."

Now they both heard it -- a faint pounding and thumping coming from far ahead of them, like pistons pumping in a distant machine. "What is it?" Veni asked.

"Shh!" said Vici, closing her eyes and opening her mind. She recoiled at what she found.

"What's wrong'?" demanded Veni, sensing his sister's distress.

"It's alive," Vici said. "It's alive, and it's big, and it's coming toward us."

"How big?"

"Huge."

The thumping quickly grew louder; small pebbles began dropping off the canyon walls and dancing about the ground.

"We gotta get out of here!" said Veni, turning to run.

"No," said Vici, grabbing his shoulder. "Hear how fast it's coming? We'll never outrun it." She looked for somewhere to hide, but the rock faces offered no cover. Neither was climbing an option; she felt confident that with a little push from the Force she could scale the sheer walls, but her brother...

"What do we do? What do we do?" Veni's eyes were wide with terror as the increasing vibrations shook a slab free from the canyon behind them to crash into fragments on the ground. Even the planimals had begun edging away from the sound.

"I'll just have to fight it," said Vici, taking up a firm stance. "Veni, give me my lightsaber,"

"But Mistress Tannis ..."

"Told me not to bring it. She didn't tell you. Hand it over."

Veni complied. Vici activated the blade, its red light splashing around the valley and drawing a few planimals towards her. A plume of smoke from the end of

the canyon heralded the approach of the creature. Coming around the bend into view, it was truly monstrous: over 10 meters of scaly, segmented body overshadowed by enormous leathery wings. Veni, hiding behind his sister, trembled at the sound of 20 powerful reptilian legs plunging toward him in deadly synchronization. Vici tried to master her fear, concentrating on the mighty power of the Force she knew she held tightly in her hands. The creature drew closer, and they could see a hideous, misshapen head, wrinkled and glittering, and dozens of needle-like teeth in a maw large enough to swallow Veni whole. It slowed to a stop as it approached them. Vici took full advantage of what she felt was the beast's momentary confusion and swung her lightsaber in a wide arc; the creature reared several pairs of legs off the ground to avoid the blow.

"Magnetic meteors!" the creature exclaimed, "what kind of a salute is that? What is Mistress Tannis teaching at the Praxeum these days, anyway?"

Vici froze in mid-slash, dumbfounded, as the creature threw seven sets of legs into reverse, backing away from the humans. "Wait," it said, "were you attacking me?" It snorted a puff of steam from its nostrils with a sound Vici assumed was a laugh. "The Sith Wars must be going badly, if Tannis is forced to graduate Jedi who can't tell friend from foe."

"You -- You're our friend?" asked Veni. Fear gave way to curiosity, and he moved out from behind his sister.

"You'd better hope so," it said with another snort. "I am Willm Lywin of the Duinuogwuin, guardian of this valley, and have been so for 600 years, give or take a decade. I have come to escort the initiate -- take it that would be you," it said, looking at Vici with a friendly twinkle in its eye, "to the Cave of Truth."

Vici hung her head in embarrassment, quickly stuffing her deactivated lightsaber haft into her pouch and wondering if Lywin could notice how red her face was. It probably can, she thought. "Master Willm," she said, "I am so sorry!"

"Oh, don't feel bad, child," the creature said with a ripple of its vast wings. "It's not as if this hasn't happened before -- remember I've been helping train Jedi for centuries. Let this be part of your lessons: never rush into conflict, no

matter how threatening a situation may seem." It made an odd, clucking sound. "The hardest thing for human initiates is always `don't be hasty.' Humans are such a fidgety species -- but very interesting," it added, with a glance toward Vici and her brother. "Now come along, let's go. The young lady has work to do before dawn, and the sun has set."

* * *

"So you see," continued Vici, who had been talking to Lywin as they walked, "our parents weren't too happy to see us go, but they understood the responsibilities of being Force-sensitive and let us come here."

"Say, Master Willm," Veni put in from his perch on the creature's back, "where are you from?"

"I told you I've been here for six centuries," it said.

"You were born here?" Veni asked.

"Ah, no -- before I came here, I escorted a Praxeum ship for about four hundred years."

"And before that?"

"Oh, that was so long ago, it wouldn't interest you little humans. Your sister's stories are much more entertaining. Now tell me, Vici, how exactly did you help your parents in their work?"

Vici herself was sure that the life of a thousand-year-old Jedi Star Dragon must be much more interesting than an explanation of I'lahsh distillation, but she respected her escort's obvious wish for privacy and continued. "Well, I'lahsh is made from the nectar of the t'il blossom, and since each blossom contains only one tiny droplet of nectar, it takes hundreds of thousands of blossoms to produce the year's vintage. And because the blossoms are so delicate, they can't be harvested by machine or even by droid -- they have to be picked by hand, one flower at a time."

"And this is your task'?" asked Lywin. He had produced a small datapad from beneath a scaly fold of his skin and was occasionally tapping information into it as he walked.

"We all join in the harvest, the whole family -- brothers, sisters, cousins, everyone. It's so beautiful in the springtime, the t'iil grows over everything with little golden trumpets glowing, and the fragrance is all around you until you feel you could get drunk from just breathing. And the flocks of nerfs like white and black specks all over the meadows, and the thrantas with their gondolas winging overhead, and Lir Lake flowing into the sea, with the cetians leaping and singing in the spray. When Delaya is bright in the night sky, sometimes we hardly even sleep, we just keep bringing in the flowers, singing and laughing, all night long. With so many people to be paid, the money doesn't go too far, but I think it's worth it -- how could anyone be paid more than to be able to walk the uplands in springtime? Alderaan is the most beautiful place in the galaxy, and I can hardly wait to see it again."

"Papa and Mamma wouldn't mind getting more money," put in Veni.
"Especially since number nine boiler broke down."

"I know," said Vici, "but it's still beautiful." She sighed. "I do wish I could help Mum and Papa with money. They worry so much. All their messages to us keep saying how they need this or want that, and can't afford to buy it."

"Humans do seem overly preoccupied with money," said Lywin, tapping away at his datapad.

"Don't Dweena, um, Dono, uh, Star Dragons use money'?" asked Veni.

"No."

"Then what do you use?"

"As a medium of exchange? We usually trade information. For example, I consider your sister's explanation of I'lahsh production a fair reward for escorting you -- I have often heard of I'lahsh, but had no idea what it was." It paused upon the path. "Ah, here we are, little ones -- the Cave of Truth."

"But that's a dead end!" Veni protested. The valley ended in a cleft piled high with rocks and boulders, over which the beginnings of the stream were trickling.

"Oh, little Jedi, I think your sister knows better than that," said Lywin with a friendly snort.

My physical senses will deceive me, Vici recalled and reached out to the Force. Sure enough, she found that the mound of stone concealed an opening into the cliff side. The largest of the boulders was too heavy for human arms to lift, but through the Force ... She began carefully levitating each stone away from the opening and setting them in a pile to one side.

"Can I help'?" asked Veni.

"No," said Lywin, "this is part of her test."

Soon Vici had cleared away enough small stones for the larger boulders, now unsupported, to roll away from the opening. The stream dropped down in a waterfall, silver beads in the moonlight, curtaining a dark tunnel. Vici shivered in excitement; here was where the real adventure began.

"Calm yourself, little Jedi," Lywin admonished gently. "Through peace we feel the Force."

Vici took several deep breaths, slowing her pulse and calming her mind. When she felt herself centered once more, she asked, "What am I to do now?"

"Enter the cave," said Lywin. "It is now five hours until dawn. You have that long to search out the cave and face its challenge. Your brother and I will wait for you here. Go, and may the Force be with you."

Vici bowed in salute to Master Willm and turned to enter the cave. Cold drops of water hit the back of her neck like icy needles; she shook them off and walked on into blackness.

The cave seemed to be a straight tunnel, dark except for moonlight filtering in from the opening, boring into the heart of the mountain. Vici began walking quickly. The path sloped down, and soon the light of the entrance was gone. Vici was walking in total blackness. After a time she quickened her pace, eager to meet the challenge of the cave. Suddenly she found herself fetched up against a solid wall. *A dead end?* she thought. *That's impossible!* But no matter how she probed, physically and mentally, she found no way forward. *Well what do I do?* She laughed. *Of course*, she thought, *how silly of me!* "Don't be hasty," *Master Willm said. I must've passed an opening in the wall on my way down.* She began retracing her steps slowly and carefully.

She found a doorway concealed in the rock-face on the right side of the tunnel; slight pressure slid it open. She moved down the new tunnel cautiously; she was not going to make the mistake of rushing past a door again. The next door led her right again, the next after that, left. Time passed, whether minutes or hours she could not tell, The darkness of the tunnels was complete. Vici could not have seen less if she were blind, yet her sense of the tunnel walls through the Force more than compensated. She did not lose her path again, and continued turning: left again, right, left again. She wondered how much farther she had to go, and how much time she had left, but she resisted the temptation to hurry, calmly opening one door after another.

Unexpectedly Vici came upon a well-lit chamber. After so long in blackness her eyes stung, and she covered her face with her hands, Slowly adjusting to the light, Vici opened her eyes again and began to make out the contents of the room.

It was not as bright as it had originally seemed. The illumination came from a small fire burning in a hearth-niche to Vici's left, Between Vici and the hearth was a large chair, its back to her; across from the chair was a table. All the details of the room, from the way the walls curved into the low, domed ceiling and the colored glass screen before the hearth to the plantlike forms of the carved table legs, brought back memories of Vici's home, and she suddenly realized how badly she wanted to be there, and how truly tired she was.

And how truly hungry. The table was laid with a supper for one; across the room she could see a pile of little cakes, what seemed to be a quarter roast bhillen, cheese and fruit, and a pot of tea with steam curling gently from the spout. *Is this for me?* she wondered. *I'm so tired -- I could sit down, just for a minute, and have some food -- still,* Vici, she told herself, *you know if you sat down you'd fall asleep in two seconds and not wake up in time to finish the test. I can always come back. No telling who could happen if my enemy caught me napping. Besides, remember what Mistress Tannis said. This may not be what it seems...* She thought she caught a glimpse of movement on the table and moved closer.

"Ugh!" she cried as a rat leapt from the cake plate to the floor. Her stomach churned as she saw that the cheese was a writhing mass of maggots; shiny

black beetles scuttled out from beneath the beneath the bhillen, the fruits burst and collapsed in a puff of rot. "How revolting!" she said and turned away from the table ... Only to cry out in alarm at the occupant of the chair behind her: a skeleton, clad in moldering, tunic and breeches identical to her own. She clutched at her pendant in horror as the firelight winked off its twin at the breast of the corpse. *What can this mean?* She began to think, but no sooner had she begun to calm her jangling nerves when the apparition of death faded away into nothingness; Vici turned, and the table was empty as well, its loathsome contents vanished like a dream. Vici shook her head. "Cave of Truth'?" she said. "More like the Cave of Lies! Still," she mused, "perhaps that's part of the test -- to find the truth behind the lies?" She began probing for a door. She found it behind a curtain.

It opened into chaos: a black, yawning void filled with rushing winds. *Surely I'm not supposed to just leap out into that!* she thought, drawing back and slamming the door. However, it was the only way forward. She checked the room again; she found no other openings, and the door she had come in by wouldn't open again. "Well," she said, "this must be it." She opened the chaos-door again; wind blew back her hair as she stood on the threshold. *This room looked safe*, but wasn't -- *well, sort of*, she thought, *so maybe?* She drew a deep breath. "May the Force be with me," she said and stepped out into the void.

The winds lifted her like a feather on a gentle spring breeze. Sooner than she would have liked, however, she found herself deposited upon a ledge. Two doors opened before her onto a pair of tunnels, one sloping up, the other down. *Which one do I take?* she wondered. She closed her eyes; *down*, she decided, *the down one feels right*. She started along it.

The passage began growing smaller. Soon Vici found herself stooping, then crawling on hands and knees as the tunnel shrank around her. Part of her mind began wondering if she'd taken the right tunnel. *No*, she thought, *it still feels like the right way, even though it's certainly not easy*.

Eventually she was forced to crawl along on her belly. *I hope that whomever I'm supposed to fight doesn't catch me like this*, she thought. *And I hope I don't run into any more rats and bugs, even illusory ones*. She paused, peering

forward in the gloom. She could see a faint light ahead, and she crawled toward it.

"At last," she sighed, wriggling from the tunnel into an open chamber. Drawing a few deep breaths, she looked around. This room was merely a rough cave; streaks of pale gold light crisscrossed about the walls in a glowing web. An archway opened on one side. Vici got up and, brushing dirt from her tunic, moved toward it, when a flash from the floor caught her eye. She looked more closely and saw, lying near the wall as if dropped and forgotten, a fist-sized crystal glowing with its own inner light: a corusca gem, the most highly prized jewel in the galaxy, formed in the core of a gas giant. *That's worth enough credits to let my parents hire half of Alderaan to pick t'iiil blossoms and still have cash to spare -- and it's just lying in the dust, waiting for me to pick it up? I don't think so. This must be another test,* she thought, *to see if I can resist it*

"All right, Mistress Tannis," she said, "I'm getting the hang of this cave ... Ouch!" she said, trying to walk out the door. The threads of light crossing the opening had stung her flesh like hot wires, and even as she drew back they glowed fiercely. Vici moved a hand toward them again; their light intensified as they bent toward her. She backed away; they faded. She moved closer to a wall, and the light-strings there began to move and glow threateningly. *I've got to get past this web. I wonder -- do these strings respond just to me, or to any movement?*

She reached out to take the corusca gem, planning to throw it at the web. The strands closest to it sprang to life, moving to wrap themselves about the stone, throbbing fiercely. Vici's fingertips stuck to the stone; with effort she jerked her hand away, her fingers smarting. Reevaluating her plan, Vici nudged the gem through the power of the Force, and more glowing threads were wound to it. She looked over her shoulder at the doorway; the light threads covering it had been partially tugged aside. *It's like a myrmin being balled up in spider web, the way the strands stick to the jewel,* she thought. *I hate to think what could have happened to me if I had just grabbed it.* She continued to nudge with her mind, rolling the jewel carefully around the edge of the floor until all of the glowing net was wrapped about it and the passage out was clear.

The next chamber was lined with softly glowing mirrors that threw Vici's image back upon her in dozens of distorted reflections. She shut her eyes and sensed her way forward. *I must be near the end, she thought. My foe must be near.*

"Hello!" she called. "I'm Vici Ramunee -- is anyone going to challenge me?" Her voice echoed around the mirrored labyrinth but met no answer. She opened her eyes.

A flicker of a color different from her clothing caught her eye; she turned to see, as if through a window, the familiar grounds and buildings of the Praxeum. She reached out a hand, and the image faded away. She rounded the next corner of the maze, and thought she caught a glimpse of her parents. "Papa?" she called. *What does this mean? She thought. It's all illusion. She tried to follow the images through the maze as they flashed and faded across the mirrors -- friends, family, places she'd known -- but they seemed to lead her around in circles.* "This is getting silly," she said. "Am I supposed to fight someone, or not?" She closed her eyes again. *All right, this way,* she decided.

The next time she opened her eyes, she found herself in a mirrored cul-de-sac. *How can I have gone wrong?* she wondered as she turned around. A mirrored panel slid shut behind her; now she was enclosed in a mirror-lined box. "Oh, I see," she said, "new puzzle -- get out of this room." She began systematically probing the walls for an exit, but found nothing. Examining the floor found a puddle of water in one corner. Vici knelt down; water was seeping in through a hairline crack between the walls, but she still couldn't find a door.

Looking around, she saw water beginning to leak in at the other seams of the room. Her feet were quite wet.

"Well, this is nice," she said. "If I could use the Force to turn myself into a water molecule, I could squeeze out. Now where's the door? And where is my enemy?"

She continued unsuccessfully testing the walls, floor and ceiling of the room as the water kept rising. When it got to her knees, she stopped, as a cold thought hit her. "It's a trap," she said softly to her reflections. "My enemy's led me into a trap somehow."

She started pounding on the walls; her mirror reflections made it look as if a crowd of young women were fighting. "This isn't funny!" she said. "Is my most dangerous foe supposed to be water?" She threw her shoulder against a wall; she and her reflection met with a dull thud. "This isn't fair!" she cried. The water was coming in faster now, rising visibly. "This isn't fair!" she repeated. "Who are you! This is no way to fight, to drown someone! Show yourself! Come on out and face me!" Vici's eyes darted frantically about the chamber, but all she saw were frightened reflections and the rising water. "What kind of crazy test is this? So help me," she said, "if you don't let me out, whoever you are, I'm going to cut my way out! And then you'd better be ready to defend yourself, because I'm going to cut my way through you!"

She drew her lightsaber, preparing to strike the mirror using all of her strength, but the shocking sight of a young woman attacking with blazing weapon, hip-deep in murky water, face twisted in a furious grimace, froze her in mid-swing. *I look awful! she thought, like some kind of deranged Dark Jedi. No wonder Mistress Tannis said don't draw it in anger -- I could scare the pants off half the galaxy with that face...*

"Don't draw it in anger," she said, lowering the blade. "And I'm pretty angry now ..." She deactivated the lightsaber. The reflection did likewise. She laughed at it. "You don't look so dangerous now," she said. "Maybe we should have gone on and attacked our enemy after all ... A dangerous-looking enemy?" she mused. The water was up to her chest. "Am I supposed to fight my reflection'?" she asked herself. "Flow?" She reached out to the mirror; the mirror hand reached gently back. They touched; Vici's hand passed through the mirror as through the surface of the water. Not stopping to think, Vici pushed through the wall.

* * *

"Congratulations, Vici," said Mistress Tannis, sitting in the small room Vici had entered. "You have passed your test."

She blinked, confused. "But I haven't fought anything."

"Haven't you?" said Tannis. "Think back -- what have you faced in the cave'?"

Vici thought. "Well, I missed a door -- I was impatient."

Tannis nodded. "Impatience can be a deadly enemy to a Jedi."

"And I was tired, and hungry, but everything in the room I found decayed and vanished -- like all matter," Vici added in realization. "So in that room I fought physical limits ..."

Tannis nodded.

"And the wind -- I fought fear, and the tight tunnel was doubt, and the corusca gem, that was greed. And the mirrors were, were..." She paused. "I kept trying to follow things that seemed important, but they led me nowhere. When I let the Force guide me, instead of trying to find the way myself, I moved on."

"And the last room?"

She thought. "Fear and impatience, again -- and anger. I fought myself. Am I my own worst enemy?"

Tannis smiled gently. "Nothing outside of us may separate us from the Force ..."

"Only our own emotions," said Vici as understanding filled her mind.

"And if we remain open to the Force," said Tannis.

"Then we are Jedi, and nothing can hurt us. We have nothing to fear," said Vici.

* * *

"Good story," murmured Mavis sleepily as Deen ended his tale.

"Yes, I really liked it," said a young man's voice from the doorway. Deen started at the intrusion.

"Sir, how long have you been ..."

"No don't get up," the man said, laughter in his voice. "I just came to thank you for repairing my droid."

"Oh, yes, of course, Sir," Deen said, trying to seem properly awestricken while still covered with children. "The rest of the tech crew wanted to wipe his memory, but I figured with the things he'd seen..."

"He'd want to keep his memory," finished the pilot. "Thanks. And thanks for the story. I loved it. I wish I'd been able to hear stories like that when I was a kid."

Deen grinned and nodded. "We don't have anything to worry about now, Sir, now that you've joined us, do we?"

"Not if we remain open to the Force."

X-Wing: Imperial Pursuit

Keyan Farlander and other pilots protect Rebel ships as they evacuate Yavin IV. Upon reaching relative safety, they are set upon by Imperials, who destroy food supply ships in the Rebel fleet.

Needing new food supplies, Keyan and others carry out missions to gather supplies and make trading contacts. It seems a godsend when Overlord Ghorin of the Plooriod Cluster offers to sell them food, but Alliance Intelligence discovers that it is all poisoned just in time to prevent a major health crisis. Luckily, they find an Imperial supply of food in time and raid it. They then pay back Ghorin by capturing some of his Y-wings and materials, then use them against the Empire, making it look like he is an enemy of the state.

The final straw is the shipment of poisoned grain to the Empire, which finally leads Darth Vader himself to kill Ghorin. The Rebels then continue with regular missions, including the destruction of the Imperial vessel Red Wind and a daring surprise strike at an Imperial Star Destroyer construction station, using a captured Corellian Corvette, the Ram's Head, to decapitate (literally, as in ramming through bridge towers, thanks to a sort of uber-shield) several Star Destroyers that are being built.

Battlefront: Renegade Squadron

"Before Alderaan was destroyed by the Death Star, Bail Organa had made a list of locations the Alliance could operate from in the event we lost our base on Yavin IV. He encrypted the information in a data holocron encased in phrik, one of the strongest substances in the galaxy. Strong enough even to have survived Alderaan's destruction. We needed that holocron, that information was vital to the Alliance."

—Col Serra to Tionne Solusar

Shortly after the Evacuation of Yavin, Han Solo and Commander Col Serra, a pair of smugglers turned Rebel officers, were told by Mon Calamari Admiral Gial Ackbar about a data holocron that had been created by Viceroy Bail Organa of Alderaan. The holocron had been created before the first Death Star had destroyed Alderaan, and contained information regarding possible locations for a new base for the Alliance. After the Alliance was forced to retreat from Yavin 4 and the Rebel base that had been centered around it, the Rebellion was in dire need of a new central base. As such, the recovery of the holocron was given significant priority by the Alliance. The holocron was known to have been encased in a rare metallic compound known as phrik, one of the strongest substances in the galaxy, and because of this, Ackbar had reason to believe that the holocron might have survived the destruction of Alderaan.

In response to this information, Ackbar ordered Solo to take a small fleet, along with Renegade Squadron, the Alliance's recently established fighting unit made up of smugglers and criminals, to the Graveyard, the asteroid remnants of Alderaan. Under Solo's command were a Mon Calamari Star Cruiser and two EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigates, several starfighter squadrons, and his own personal ship, the *Millennium Falcon*. Unbeknownst to the Rebels, the Empire had also discovered the existence and whereabouts of the holocron, and had sent a fleet to the Alderaan system as well. As a contingency plan, the Empire also hired the bounty hunter Boba Fett to find the holocron in case their forces failed.

"The holocron. You have it, I want it."

—Boba Fett talking to the Renegades

When the Alliance fleet arrived out of hyperspace, they discovered that there was an Imperial fleet made up of an Interdictor Star Destroyer and two *Victory II*-class frigates already in the system. The Interdictor launched half of a squadron of TIE fighters, and in response, Col Serra quickly ordered a member of Renegade Squadron to take out the six incoming TIE fighters using an X-wing starfighter. After a small dogfight, the six TIE fighters were destroyed. However, both sides continued to launch starfighters, escalating the battle.

As the battle intensified, Solo and his Wookiee co-pilot, Chewbacca, launched the *Millennium Falcon* from the Mon Calamari Star Cruiser to locate and retrieve the holocron. Solo ordered his Renegades to keep fighting the

Imperials, hoping to use the battle as a distraction. However, a trio of TIE interceptors followed the *Falcon* and managed to damage it. The Renegades were eventually able to destroy the interceptors, and Solo informed his men that he had found the location of the holocron, but that the *Falcon* was too badly damaged to pick it up. As a result, Solo instead ordered Renegade Squadron to retrieve the holocron from the Graveyard and they did so.

After the Renegades picked up the holocron, Boba Fett arrived into the battle from hyperspace and gave chase in his personal starship, *Slave I*. Realizing that the Empire was about to lose its prize to the Rebels, Fett radioed the Renegades to inform them that he was after the holocron. Understanding that Fett posed a larger threat than the Imperials, Col Serra ordered Renegade Squadron not to allow the bounty hunter to retrieve the holocron. As such, the Renegades engaged Fett, eventually causing enough damage to *Slave I* that it forced Fett to leave the battle and jump to hyperspace. The Imperials were now forced to retrieve the holocron themselves.

With Fett's retreat, the Renegades just had to destroy the Imperial Interdictor's gravity well projectors before they could jump back into hyperspace, so Serra ordered the Rebel forces to attack the battleship. The Renegades were able to eventually destroy the gravity well projectors, and with the way clear, Han Solo led his fleet away from the Graveyard and out of the system.

With the holocron in Rebel hands, Ackbar decided to personally examine one of the prospective planets on the holocron's list. Ackbar and a small scouting party traveled to the graveyard world of Boz Pity in the Outer Rim, and after scouting the planet, he decided it would make an ideal spot for a new base. Nonetheless, the Mon Calamari sought to examine other options and took a smaller scouting party with him to Saleucami, another planet on the list. However, when they exited hyperspace over Saleucami, they were ambushed by Boba Fett. Fett was able to defeat the Rebels and captured Ackbar and a number of other survivors. Fett then sold Ackbar to the Imperials and presented the other survivors to the Hutt Cartel on the planet Tatooine.

"My orders were to rendezvous with Han Solo on Ord Mantell for repairs, following the damage we sustained in the Alderaan System."

—Col Serra on why Renegade Squadron went to Ord Mantell.

Shortly after the mission to the Graveyard, Alliance High Command ordered Solo and Renegade Squadron to the planet Ord Mantell to get repairs for the *Falcon* in the meantime. Because the Alliance believed that Ord Mantell was such a backwater planet with a small Imperial garrison, Renegade Squadron thought that they would be safe there. However, while the Renegades were relaxing in a cantina on Ord Mantell, the droid bounty hunter IG-88, seeking the bounty the Empire had posted for captured Rebels, found them. IG-88 burst into the cantina and started firing at the squadron, and soon enough the entire Imperial garrison was made aware of the Renegades' presence on the planet.

"Maybe it was just bad luck that he was there, or maybe we had caused enough damage for the Empire to be actively hunting us, but when that bounty hunter turned up, I knew there was trouble."

—Col Serra to Tionne Solusar years after the battle.

As IG-88 started to attack Renegade Squadron, several stormtroopers from the Imperial garrison entered the battle too. However, the Renegades fought back, and most of squadron was able to make their back to the hangar, although one Rodian rebel was shot by IG-88. When they reached the hangar, the squadron discovered that the repairs on the *Falcon* had not been completed yet, and that they were temporarily trapped on Ord Mantell. Commander Serra ordered the Renegades to secure the junkyard around the hangar and to find parts there so that Solo could fix the *Falcon* himself. After fighting off the assaulting stormtroopers, the Rebels were able to capture the junkyard, using a T4-B heavy tank they had brought with them as support. Chewbacca, Solo's Wookiee companion and copilot, came charging into the battle, ordered by Solo to find parts needed for their ship.

"Suddenly, there were Imperials everywhere. All we had to do was fight our way back to our shipyards, get the repairs done to our ship, and get off Ord Mantell before the nearest Star Destroyer squadron showed up...simple right?"

—Col Serra on the battle.

Serra told Renegade Squadron to protect Chewbacca from the assaulting stormtroopers while the Wookiee searched for the parts. The Imperials then launched a larger attack wave, along with TX-130T fighter tanks and AT-ST

walkers from the nearby trading outposts, trying to kill Chewbacca before he could find the parts. The Renegades were still able to hold off the Empire's assault for several minutes, protecting Chewbacca from laser fire. Finally, Chewbacca was able to find all the parts he needed among the assorted trash, and ran back to the hangar.

After Chewbacca got to the hangar with the parts, Solo informed his squadron that there was an anti-aircraft gun on the other side of the junkyard at the trading outpost, which could destroy the *Falcon* if they took off. Solo ordered the squadron to go disable the turret at all costs, and Renegade Squadron fought their way to the outpost, pushing past the stormtroopers defending the gun. When Renegade Squadron made it to the outpost though, however, they discovered that the anti-aircraft gun was enveloped by a deflector shield, which was strong enough to repel any attack the Renegades could make against the gun. Commander Serra was quickly able to pinpoint the location of the turret's shield generator, at the facilities junk processor, and sent Renegade Squadron to destroy it.

Defeating the stormtroopers guarding the area, the Rebels blew up the generator, disabling the anti-aircraft turret's shield. The Renegades moved back to the trading outpost, and destroyed the now unprotected turret. As soon as the turret was disabled, General Solo informed his squad that the *Falcon* needed a new power core to be operational, and that he had located one back over at the processor plant. Serra ordered a member of Renegade Squadron to travel back to the junk processor plant and grab the core, and to bring it back to the hangar. The Rebel ran the power core back to the hangar for Solo to complete his repairs on his ship.

Solo now had all the parts need to repair the *Falcon*, but he still need time to fix the ships damaged systems. In the meantime, the Imperials had successfully pushed the Renegade Squadron back to the hangar and were now launching one last wave to try to halt the Rebels' retreat. Serra ordered the squadron to hold back the Imperial assault so that Solo could finish his repairs. The Renegades protected the hangar for several minutes, using their T4-B tanks as support again, and the squadron was successfully able to hold back the Imperials as the repairs were completely.

However, as soon as Solo finished his repairs, IG-88 then came into the battle again, leading the remaining Imperial troops, trying to stop Renegade Squadron. Solo ordered the Renegades to destroy the droid and buy enough

time for him to get the launch preps for the *Falcon* done. Although the bounty hunter droid used a large array of weapons against the Renegades, the rebels were able to badly damage IG-88 and push back the last stormtroopers. Solo then informed his troops that the *Falcon* was ready to go, and the rebels boarded the cargo ship and left Ord Mantell for good.

The *Millennium Falcon* jumped to hyperspace just as a squadron of Imperial Star Destroyers jumped into the system to stop them. The remaining members of Renegade Squadron would then rendezvous with Alliance command, were they discovered that Gial Ackbar, the Alliance's Mon Calamarian Admiral, had been captured while on a scouting mission and was now in the Empire's custody. The Alliance quickly dispatched a fleet, along with its new elite fighting force, Renegade Squadron, to intercept the Imperial fleet holding Ackbar over Kessel. Renegade Squadron was ordered to board the Star Destroyer containing Ackbar and free the Admiral. The Rebels believed that if they did not rescue Ackbar in time, he would break under Imperial torture, and all of the Alliance's secrets would be in jeopardy.

"Ackbar was vital to the Alliance. The best battle tactician we had. We had to get him back. Information from Alliance Command was that he was aboard a Star Destroyer, en route to the Imperial prison colonies on Kessel."

—Col Serra

The Alliance fleet, composed of a Mon Calamari Cruiser and a pair of Nebulon-B frigates, jumped out of hyperspace over Kessel just as the Imperial fleet entered the system. Renegade Squadron launched its starfighters from the Mon Calamari Cruiser's hangar bay, including X-wing, Y-wing, and A-wing fighters, as well as Solo's personal freighter, the *Millennium Falcon*. The Renegades began to attack the incoming Imperials, with Serra ordering them to destroy the communications array on the Star Destroyer holding Ackbar, thus preventing any Imperial reinforcements from being called. During the Renegades' initial sweep, they were able to wipe out the Star Destroyer's comm array, as well as incapacitate both of the *Victory II*-class frigates escorting the larger Star Destroyer by disabling their laser cannons. With the frigates unable to defend the fleet, the Star Destroyer proceeded to launch its complement of TIE Fighters, Bombers, and Interceptors to fight off the assaulting Rebel forces. Renegade Squadron engaged the Imperial fighters, quickly dispatching six of the TIE Fighters.

"Looks like Ackbar hasn't reached Kessel yet. We need to get him off that Star Destroyer before it's too late."

—Han Solo

With the Imperial starfighters neutralized and the Imperial frigates no longer a threat, Solo ordered a member of Renegade Squadron to gather a Low Altitude Assault Transport/infantry gunship from their hangar and use it to send a boarding party—made up of Rebel troopers, vanguards, and Wookiee warriors—onto the Star Destroyer and free Ackbar. The Rebels were able to land the gunship inside the Star Destroyer's hangar, and the boarding team engaged the ship's stormtrooper crew, forcing its way deeper into the Imperial vessel until it found Ackbar, who was held in a small room near the hangar.

"Thank you. Now, it is time we find a way off this Star Destroyer."

—Admiral Ackbar, upon being rescued by Renegade Squadron

Escorting the Mon Calamari back to their gunship, the Renegades found that they were unable to leave, as the Imperials had deployed a force field around the magnetic containment field of the hangar, sealing the Rebels inside. From his command post, Serra managed to locate a shield generator at the side of the Imperial launch bay powering the shield and radioed its location to the boarding party. One of the Renegades destroyed the generator, allowing the Rebels and Ackbar to get into their transport and flee the Star Destroyer. Once Ackbar was safely aboard the Mon Calamari Cruiser, Solo ordered his forces away from Kessel and to jump into the safety of hyperspace.

When Solo and his fleet returned to Alliance High Command, Ackbar reported to those present what had led to his capture and the events surrounding his imprisonment. The Mon Calamari Admiral informed the Rebel leaders that Fett had not given the rest of the captured scouting party to the Empire, but had brought them elsewhere. Using his knowledge from his days as a smuggler, Serra concluded that the bounty hunter had sold the captured Rebels to the Hutt slave market on Tatooine.

"Chances were the captured crew were dead or sold as slaves already, but nobody on Renegade Squadron believed in abandoning good men."

—Col Serra

Renegade Squadron arrived at Mos Eisley aboard Solo's ship, the *Millennium Falcon*, and immediately deployed on the southern side of the city. The squadron's second-in-command, Col Serra, ordered the Renegades to go and capture the local cantina to see if anyone there would reveal information for the price of a few drinks, and to get a stronger foothold in the city. While en route to the cantina, they were ambushed by stormtroopers from the local Imperial garrison.

After fighting their way through the stormtroopers, Renegade Squadron arrived at the cantina and fought off the stormtroopers stationed there. Once they had successfully captured the building, the squadron found a Rodian with Rebel sympathies, who agreed to take them to where the prisoners were being held. The Renegades followed the Rodian across the street to a force field protected hangar owned by the Hutts, fending off additional Imperials who were trying to stop the Rodian. The Rodian identified that the hangar was where the prisoners were being held, so Solo dispatched the squadron to find and destroy the three shield generators that powered the force field to the hangar.

Although the generators were scattered around the city, Serra quickly discovered the generators' locations and uploaded the information to the squadron's tactical maps. Two generators were located in the city's southern slums, and the last was in the bantha pens on the northern side of the city. After eliminating the stormtroopers defending the generators, the Renegades rendered the generators inoperative. With the shield generators disabled, Renegade Squadron was finally able to move inside the hangar. The stormtroopers guarding the prisoners attempted to fend off the Rebels, but after a brief fight, Renegade Squadron was able to defeat them and capture the hangar.

The prisoners were locked in a small cell in the hangar, so Solo started use a fusioncutter to free them. The remainder of the Imperial garrison attempted to retake the Hutt hangar to stop Solo from freeing the slaves, but Renegade Squadron was able to hold back the Imperial assault for a few minutes while Solo finished his work. As soon as the prisoners were freed, the Imperials sent in two AT-STs to pin the group in the Hutt hangar. However, the Renegades destroyed the two walkers while the liberated Rebels made their way back to the southern slums where the *Falcon* was waiting for them. When all the prisoners were aboard, General Solo prepped the ship for takeoff while Commander Serra and the rest of the Squadron defended the landing site. Once the ship was ready to go, Solo ordered everyone aboard and took off, leaving Tatooine and the remaining Imperials behind.

"It was a trap, and we had walked right into it!"

—Commander Serra

Although the Alliance considered the mission a success and a miracle rescue, it was later learned that the entire mission was a trap. During the skirmish, Boba Fett was able to secretly plant a tracking device on an R5-series astromech droid that had accompanied the Rebels during the mission. Fett tracked the

Rebels to their new base on Boz Pity, and after a few hours, an Imperial fleet exited hyperspace over the planet, beginning an assault on the base.^[1]

While the Renegades escaped Tatooine to the Alliance base on Boz Pity with their liberated comrades, the squadron also brought back an R5-series droid it had captured. However, unbeknownst to Renegade Squadron, the bounty hunter Boba Fett, out to collect the Empire's bounty for information on the Rebel Alliance, had installed a homing beacon into the droid. With this information, the Empire launched a full scale invasion of the Rebels' base. A few hours after Renegade Squadron arrived at Boz Pity, an Imperial fleet dropped out of hyperspace over the planet.

"A few hours after we arrived at Boz Pity, an Imperial planetary assault force descended upon us."

—Commander Serra

With their base compromised, Alliance Admiral Gial Ackbar quickly ordered an evacuation of Boz Pity, with some Rebels using their tamed carrion spat pack animals as transports to easily traverse the base. However, the Imperials soon landed ground forces on the planet, hoping to halt the Alliance's escape. As the Imperial ground troops, speeder bikes, and walkers approached the Rebel base, Renegade Squadron was tasked with holding off the Imperial Army while the rest of the Alliance's personnel made it off the planet. Serra, realizing that the Renegades would not likely survive the battle, planned to slow the Empire's advance by any means necessary. Serra ordered his squadron to capture and hold the base's main gate, the only entrance into the base. With the gate secure, the Renegades were able to repel the first wave of Imperials, destroying an All Terrain Scout Transport walker and killing several Imperial stormtroopers.

However, as the second wave of Imperials approached—which included many more stormtroopers and an All Terrain Armored Transport—Serra realized that the Rebels were not strong enough to defend the main gate and ordered Renegade Squadron to fall back deeper into the base. Solo placed a container of thermal explosives at the side of the gate house and told one of his men to place a detpack next to the container. As the Empire's AT-AT arrived at the main gate, the Rebels triggered the detpack and the thermal explosives. The resulting explosion blew out the AT-AT's forward two legs, causing the walker to crash down. With the walker destroyed, the Imperials were forced to fall back and regroup.

The temporary Imperial retreat bought the Renegades some time, and Solo ordered his squadron to set up a pair of particle cannon turrets and several laser cannons as the Imperials launched their third attack wave, with two AT-STs in front of the assault. As the Imperials moved deeper into the Rebel base, however, they experienced heavy fire from Renegade Squadron's turrets and suffered several casualties, including the AT-STs.

Though Renegade Squadron had destroyed the first few attack waves, more and more Imperial stormtroopers flooded into the base. During the resulting firefight, Ackbar was shot by an Imperial sniper and injured. Hearing the news, Solo ordered a member of Renegade Squadron to bring a bacta container to the injured admiral. After being partially healed, Ackbar was able to make his way to the evacuation zone.

It soon became obvious to the Rebels that the Boz Pity base was lost, as the Imperials were now deploying more AT-ST walkers and pushing back the Renegades. The Empire managed to capture the Rebels' particle turrets and laser cannons, using them against the retreating Alliance troops. Solo ordered Renegade Squadron to the evacuation zone, an ancient sacrificial circle at rear of the base, and to defend the area as he prepared several LAAT/i gunships for launch. Using T4-B heavy tanks for support, the Renegades held off the enemy advance for a few minutes. Finally, Solo was able to get the gunships ready for liftoff, and Renegade Squadron escaped Boz Pity and the Imperial fleet.

Although the Alliance lost Boz Pity to the Empire, Renegade Squadron and most of the Alliance's personnel there successfully made it off the planet and evaded the Empire. Renegade Squadron would continue to serve the Alliance, making several hit-and-run attacks against the Empire over the next few years.

35:9:11/GLR/92R#/TIM.3.TAD/LIF/
W.Windrow

Timora Sunpetals Make Great Gifts!

Tadarc, Timora

As Fete week approaches, many celebrants are faced with the quarterly quandary of choosing the traditional gift for their business associates. With this year's wonderful bumper crop of sunpetal flowers on Timora, there has never been a better time to purchase an arrangement of these spectacular plants. Imagine the look of surprise when your spons anji anta nobaka ff ko 4883 virastack virastack virastack Galactic Weekly News Stack Galactic Weekly News Stack

Galactic Weekly NewsStack News Flash

Shakeup in the happy Rebel family! With peace-keeper and arbiter Bail Organa orbiting the Alderaan star in several billion pieces, it seems Bel Iblis has had enough of Mon Mothma's ambitions, and has taken leave of his Rebel comrades. Mr. Iblis has chosen to take his army and supporters, and go home (or at least, out to some unknown rock of a planet out in the Rim), rather than see Mothma crown herself queen of the universe when Palpatine is dealt with. Mothma is not at all pleased at his desertion, and aides have been tiptoeing around her all week. Mentioning his name is a good way of volunteering for Alliance remote scout duty, we've heard. This probably has nothing to do with the fact that Iblis apparently began addressing her in

the third person as Empress Mothma in their final encounter. Children, children! Personally, we think he's still sore at having his thunder stolen by Mothma at the Corellian Treaty signing. As for Mothma, well, she's been a bit on edge lately since the arrest of her old sparring partner Omonda by our wonderful Imperial masters. More news as it breaks, naturally!

End Transmission

sgfe er f di594 4 sdf1 jkgare only expected to remain at such a low price for the remainder of the season, so make plans to purchase an ample supply of these gorgeous flowers within a few weeks.

by Wanda Windrow *Galactic Resorts*

From The Notes Of Voren Na'al

7 months after the battle of Yavin

To: Major Arhurl Hextrophon, Executive Secretary and Master Historian, Alliance High Command

From: Lieutenant Voren Na'al, Assistant Historian

Regarding: Research into the events immediately preceding the Alliance victory at the Battle of Yavin.

Sir:

Your notes regarding the events surrounding the Alliance victory at Yavin (for inclusion in the upcoming *Official History of the Rebellion, Volume One*) are indeed woefully incomplete, as you had predicted.

The final battle is fully documented in the Yavin base computer banks. But the strange tale of the great heroes of the Alliance, namely Commander Skywalker and his associate, remains something of a mystery to most of the support personnel — myself included.

When you assigned me the task of backtracking their adventures from Tatooine to Yavin, I hoped initially to shed new light on the deeds and accomplishments of the heroes, perhaps making them appear a little more “human” than we have been led to believe.

Now, you may think that I intended to degrade the honor heaped upon their names, but this was not so. I only wished to record an objective, historically accurate portrayal of the actual events, free from the hyperbole often associated with brave deeds in times of war.

As you probably realize by the time you reach the end of the accompanying data file, I did not succeed. It is to my chagrin that I must admit that these intrepid heroes deserve even more praise than we have accorded them. Your accounts portray the modesty as well as the courage in all of them, except Captain Solo. His lack of modesty, admittedly, is part of his roguish nature and overall charm. The rescue of Leia Organa from the Death Star alone was an unimaginable feat, but add to that the one-in-a-billion shot with which Commander Skywalker destroyed the massive battle station and you have the stuff of legends.

My attempt at historical accuracy will undoubtedly contribute to the confusion of future archivists, when they must eventually come to terms with the recent events that we have been fortunate enough to behold.

Please forgive my enthusiasm for these fine beings, Major Hextrophon, and excuse the blatant unprofessionalism of the enclosed report. Where and how you choose to use this wealth of information is, of course, up to you. I just hope that I have added some small amount of knowledge about these strange and dangerous times in which we live.

My journey began at Thila, where we were still organizing after abandoning the base on the fourth moon of Yavin. It was imperative to leave Yavin before the Imperial fleet arrived to finish the battle station's mission.

Leaving Thila, I began by retracing the heroes' journey from Tatooine to Yavin. My cover was as journalist for the Imperial News Bureau, an intergalactic newsnet service. This gave me a reasonable credit allowance, justification for carrying my holorecorder, and an excuse for asking too many questions without looking suspicious. I hitched a ride aboard an Alliance supply ship and

was unceremoniously dropped off in the savage rain forests of Yuga Two - a very covert base of operations, but assuredly a most uninteresting place. Here, among the clinging trees of Yuga Planetary Park (an unabashed tourist trap), I paid full fare to acquire a stateroom aboard Galaxy Tours' Kuari Princess. While under different circumstances I might have complained about paying full price for less than a quarter of a tour, I needed to reach my destination under public transport. I quietly handed over the credits. Tatooine, the final destination on this leg of the tour, was no more than a weekaway. And on that world of sand and rock, I would begin my studies of Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia Organa, and the other heroes of the battle of Yavin.

I didn't really go into the desert. I admit it. After I heard what awaited me out there, I just couldn't go. But you have to admit that the title has a certain punch, though. My first stop on Tatooine was the infamous Mos Eisley cantina. After several extensive interviews under extremely hazardous conditions, I left the cantina and found the stale, dry air of the streets strangely refreshing. But my moment of solitude after hours in the crowded cantina was short-lived. I was immediately accosted by those creepy Jawa creatures. They were peddling two droids: an astromech called R5-D4, and a power droid. Well, in an effort to establish good relations with the Jawas, since I had to report on them anyway, I asked for more details on the two machines. That was my first and last mistake on Tatooine. My consumer resistance fell through the floor and I found myself purchasing them both at what I considered a steal. Robbery was more like it! I soon discovered that the R5 unit had a bad motivator and I really had no use whatsoever for a power droid, especially one as antiquated as this one.

Unable to find the Jawas who sold me the droids - they really all do look alike to me - I searched out the nearest repair shop. There, I discovered that the R5 droid was known to have had motivator trouble before, as evidenced by the charred layers of carbon along the inside of the "head." I decided to replace the whole thing and convinced myself that the Alliance could always use two more droids. After the cleanup, they eagerly followed me back to my cabin and I began to find out a little more about each of them. Red, as I now call the old R5, was able to communicate with me by plugging into my datapad. In this way, Red also translated for the power droid, although this particular machine didn't really have much to say. The results of my inquiries were nothing short of astounding. The sleazy little scrap salesmen had unknowingly saved

me weeks of research. These two ancient droids were present when a group of Jawas captured the Alliance's most famous droids, Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio, and also saw them subsequently purchased by Luke Skywalker's uncle (now deceased).

Their fate after that is a sordid and terrifying tale, and forms the majority of the information I gathered on the Jawas and Sand People of Tatooine. Before I left Tatooine, I gave the power droid to a needy moisture farmer and sold R5D4 to the Imperial prefect's assistant administrator.

The Rebel Alliance should benefit greatly from the information the droid will obtain. As of this moment, only Momaw Nadon knows of Red's new role in the Rebellion.

Camie's Story

This tale, told to Voren Na'al by a young woman who claimed to be a friend of Luke Skywalker)

This was the first year Luke had to stay on the moisture farm after the last of his friends had left. Oh, I was still around, but that's not the same as racing around with the likes of Biggs Darklighter. His Aunt Beru was busy just maintaining the produce groves and keeping the house respectable, leaving Luke to worry about Uncle Owen and his constant hatred of vaporators.

Funny, I saw Luke kick the blasted things more than once - he had the worst luck keeping those things going. If the sand and lack of parts weren't bad enough, roaming Jawas and less-honorable moisture farmers often stripped any equipment not protected by the perimeter shields during the night. They never took a whole unit, though, just a few critical parts. You know, Owen's hardworking nature always seemed to make up for the setbacks.

One time in particular, just before Biggs headed off to the Academy, Uncle Owen and Luke argued about sending in Luke's application. Owen needed Luke for another season. He just couldn't afford to hire any help at the time, or so he said. Luke's Aunt Beru, a wonderful lady, finally suggested a compromise. Luke would stay on for just one more season and Owen would put away enough credits to hire a worker to replace him.

To my amazement, Owen agreed. And what was more amazing, a few weeks later he gave Luke a used T-16 skyhopper as a gift. Sure it needed work, but Owen was right there to help Luke get it ready to fly. Sometimes that man was a real contradiction, but I often got the feeling that he just didn't want Luke to leave Tatooine. Every so often when Luke brought it up, I thought I saw something in Owen's eyes - not anger, but maybe sadness or fear. Who can really say? They spent all of their spare time in that work shed out back, replacing parts and rebuilding things. Luke wanted to make the skyhopper fast enough to beat Biggs' newer model, and I think Owen wanted to as well.

Aunt Beru always brought a good idea and a cool drink out with her when she came to visit her men. And when they became frustrated, she had words of encouragement that got them going again. Sometimes I'd sit and watch Luke and Owen work, and listen to Luke's dreams and Owen's realities. Luke wanted to live a life of adventure. Owen said he had seen too many heroes die.

Well, they finally got that airspeeder up and running, and it was the fastest thing around. But I think that had as much to do with Luke's flying as with their mechanical skills. They even got the blasters working, although Owen told Luke in no uncertain terms that he didn't think too highly of him using them. He said they could get Luke into "bad habits."

It was a shock when we learned that Owen and Beru were dead. Some people say that Luke killed them, and I guess the law out in Mos Eisley is offering a reward for his capture. I don't believe that, not for a second. It still makes me wonder who did that to them, though – they were such nice people. I do miss that family ... because it was a family and sometimes a family is the best thing there is in the galaxy.

Although my little investigative journey was now over and I was safe on Thila once again, I still had the long process of assembling my notes ahead of me. I had nearly resolved to reorganize my entire story, piece by piece, when an unexpected guest dropped by.

Wedge Antilles came by my cabin for a social call. We talked for awhile and I shared with him some of what I learned. Before he left, I confided in him that I

was having some trouble reporting on all the characters I had met during the voyage, and that I was especially concerned with how I should portray the Alliance's greatest heroes. I'd already scanned the existing recorded interviews. What could I ask them that they hadn't been asked before?

Wedge smiled. "Why not ask them what they think of making the Empire's Most Wanted list?"

With that, he left me alone with my thoughts and my notes, confident that I would figure out what to do.

I caught up with Commander Skywalker only moments before he was scheduled to patrol Thila's dangerous wastelands. He was hopping into the cockpit of a modified airspeeder when I approached.

"Commander Skywalker!" I yelled out hopefully.

He stopped putting his helmet on, leaned over, and smiled. "Yes?" he called down.

"Can I have a word with you? I'd like to ask you a few questions." I sounded too much like a reporter and the Commander seemed unimpressed.

Luke smiled. "I've got a run, so either jump in or step back."

He was challenging me. I hesitated for a moment, not realizing that he meant I should climb into the unused gunner's compartment. He began to power the speeder up and I felt a surge of bravery. I don't know why, but I climbed clumsily up the wing and sat myself down.

"Buckle up!" he yelled back to me, and I suddenly realized that I was facing backwards – so to speak. I was looking down the rear of the speeder while he was behind me, facing the front.

I quickly wondered how I was going to interview him this way, as I hastily strapped myself in. We were off in seconds, and it was the strangest sensation I ever had, flying backwards out of a hangar under the huge protective blast

doors and beyond the Iotia Mountains. He was flying low and reckless, and the Thilian dust swept up behind us.

"So, what do you want to know?"

"Call me Voren, sir."

"Sir?" he mused. "Only Threepio calls me sir. I'm Luke. Glad to meet you, Voren."

"Glad to meet you too, sir. I mean Luke." I cannot explain how odd it was talking to a chair, since I couldn't see Luke for the life of me. "Well, I assume you've seen the Empire's latest Most Wanted List..."

The ship veered suddenly.

"Those lying Womprats, '~ he shouted as the left wing scraped the sand and my heart almost stopped. "Stormtroopers killed my aunt and uncle, not me."

"According to the list, you're wanted for their murder. And the Empire says you stole two Droids and a landspeeder, proving your guilt..." I knew these were lies, but he was starting to get really agitated. The best interviews often come under such circumstances, or so I had heard.

"The Droids were purchased by my uncle for the upcoming harvest and..." The commander paused and his flying became smooth and steady. I decided not to press my luck, but instead prodded him out of his state.

"He was like a father to you wasn't he?"

"Yeah, but my father was different. He was...a Jedi." The last word trailed for a moment, and when he spoke it, I could hear the reverence in his voice. "I don't remember my father. Somehow I think he was a lot like Ben...was."

Now I was on touchy ground.

"The Empire says you're insane and you still 'talk' to General Kenobi sometimes. Is any of that true?"

Luke laughed. "You might think I'm crazy, but the Force is powerful. It's made by all living things, and death is really only one stage of life. Ben talks to me all right."

"Like when you made your famous *shot*?"

"Yeah. Ben said 'trust the force' and I did."

"But couldn't that have been just wishful thinking, or your own subconscious mind talking?"

"Perhaps. But the more I learn about the Force, the more I wonder."

Suddenly Luke sounded a thousand years old, like he'd seen the entire galaxy a few times and was ready to teach me a lesson about it.

"General Kenobi is not here to defend himself," I said, "so I'd like to ask you about some of the Empire's accusations concerning him."

"Go ahead. I just hope I can answer them. I only really knew him for a short time."

"He is dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say. Darth Vader killed him, like he killed my father and the other Jedi Knights."

"And yet you claim to still speak with him. You know that the Empire claims no body was found, and supposedly even Vader is mystified by Kenobi's disappearance aboard the Death Star."

"I'm not sure about that myself. I only watched the battle from afar, as my friends and I made our way to the *Falcon*."

"He bought you time then?"

"Yes. Perhaps the Force 'takes' those who are strongest with it. I don't know very much about it, really. I can just feel it, everywhere, around us now, and down there on the planet."

"Even in this desert?" I asked.

"Yes, even here." He seemed far away now. Almost worried, in a sense. It frightened me.

"I wish there were more of them," he whispered.

"You mean Jedi?"

"Ben was the last one. The only one who could have trained me to be a Jedi Knight, like my father. It's just me now..."

I tried to think of something to say, something to comfort the young man. But just then, out of the blue, he rolled the speeder twice, making me mildly ill, and dove down into a vast canyon.

Skirting the jagged walls, he smiled and said, "Just like Beggar's Canyon back home."

After I had regained my land-legs and had a good meal, I went off in search of the next hero on my list. Princess Leia Organa. formerly of Alderaan. I managed to corral Leia in the temporary command center here on Thila. where she was finishing up plans for a supply raid.

"Excuse me, could I have a word with you Princess Leia?" I asked.

She frowned at me menacingly. "Do I know you?"

"No, I don't.....

She brushed by me and out through the door. I hurried to follow her as a communications technician mumbled a cynical "good luck" behind me.

"Princess." I stammered after her.

She stopped cold in her tracks and wheeled around nose to nose with me. "What is it you want?" she asked impatiently.

For a moment I wondered whether or not this was a good idea. "I wanted to ask you some questions." I began.

'Tve already had my fill of questions for the day. Maybe tomorrow."

She started to turn around again and was 20 paces ahead of me before f could speak. But I recovered and found my voice. "I wanted to ask you some questions about the Empire's Most Wanted List."

To my amazement, she stopped and turned around again. I'd never seen someone so flushed with rage before in my life. Immediately noticed the blaster at her side and began to look around for a convenient escape route.

"Follow me. Lieutenant," she ordered and I smartly did as she asked.

We arrived at one of the rec lounges and took a seat beside a holochess table. "Look. I'm sorry." she started. but it didn't have quite the tone of an apology. "It's been a rough day. what with the evacuation and everything."

I was startled. "Evacuation? What evacuation? We just got here!"

"And we're just about to leave. We think some of our transports were sighted in this vicinity. You know. the fleet isn't the easiest thing in the galaxy to hide."

Nodding in agreement. I plunged ahead. "I am Voren Na'al, assistant historian assigned to Major Hextrophon. I have to ask you some questions."

Leia's features softened considerably at the mention of my mentor's name. "Yes, Arhul told me to expect a visit from you. We all serve in our own way, I guess. Go ahead. ask your questions."

I cleared my throat. realizing that what I was going to ask might not be taken well. "Imperial agencies have placed your name on their lists of persons wanted for crimes against the Empire. With each list is a report that claims you earned your seat in the Senate through dishonorable actions. How do you respond to this?"

"Vader and the Emperor wish it were true. Other senators followed me because I told the truth and stood up for what I believed in. The Empire stoops

lower and lower every day. out of desperation and humiliation. The Alliance grows stronger by the day. as system by system slips through the Emperor's grasp."

"The Empire also claims that Alderaan was aiding the Rebellion by engineering deadly biowar products," I said, "which was the reason it was destroyed."

The Princess's face paled considerably. "My homeworld had no such programs. I am very proud of what my planet and my father stood for. Peace was always the highest goal that Bail Organa set, peace and freedom for all planets. The Empire cannot hide behind lies and propaganda concerning the murders of billions of innocent people. There is no excuse for such a monstrous action."

Seeing tears well in her eyes, along with grim determination, I decided to change the focus of the interview. "Princess, you seem to have become very close to those who rescued you from the Death Star and have subsequently been referred to as the Heroes of Yavin. Can you tell me a little about this relationship?"

Now the softness returned as she spoke. "Comander Skywalker, Captain Solo, Chewbacca, and the two Droids are all admirable additions to the ranks of the Alliance. I've never served beside braver, more capable individuals. And yes, we have all become friends. You know, it's more than friendship really..."

I jumped in as the Princess paused to gather her thoughts. "I have heard rumors to the effect that Captain Solo has said, and I quote, 'her highness has a crush on me,' end quote."

Leia raised herself to her full height and smiled. She eyed me coolly, saying nothing, but managing to convey her opinions of Solo's boasts quite clearly. "As I was going to say before I was so rudely interrupted," she said after a moment, "we have become more than friends - we've become family. "

"But Captain Solo was telling everyone in the wardroom that..."

"Good day, Lieutenant Na'al. I hope not to see you again."

This was an order, of that her tone left no doubt. As she stormed off, I heard her mumble something about showing Han what he could do with a

hydrosponder. I decided that Princess Leia Organa was not someone I wanted mad at me.

If half the rumors I'd heard about Captain Solo were true, he'd be my best interview to be sure, and probably my hardest. He was the easiest to find, as he can almost always be found during the daylight hours working on his Corellian stock light freighter, the infamous *Millennium Falcon*.

At night, he gambled with anyone who was foolish enough to take him on. I decided it would be safer, and probably less expensive, to visit the hangar bay instead. I was in luck, as Chewbacca was obviously working on the sensor controls near the top of the ship, and I could hear Solo's distinctive voice bellowing from up an access ramp.

"Chewie! Cut the backup! Cut the backup!" he called out.

Chewbacca was welding two baffle plates together and could not possibly have heard Captain Solo. The sound of shorting circuits and the smell of smoke wafted down the ramp as I ventured inside.

Within the *Falcon*, Captain Solo was shaking his right hand violently at his Wookieeee co-pilot. He started walking very quickly toward an access ladder leading up. Unfortunately: I was between him and his destination.

"Chewie!" he yelled as he knocked me into a pile of condensor cables. He turned quickly and pointed at me. "[I'll be right back."

I decided to sit in place as the Corellian climbed out of sight. I heard more yelling, followed by a roar that shook the whole ship. Then Solo was descending the ladder, finally stopping in front of a control panel.

"Now, Chewie?" he called up pleasantly.

Chewbacca responded with a friendly bellow' from above and Solo threw a switch. The ship went completely dark, and I heard Solo mumble under his breath, "It's not my fault." A muffled *whump!* echoed through the hangar as the ship's power coupler buffers came online. The lights snapped on. Solo's fist

was against the panel. Captain Solo looked around with a smile and then noticed my presence. His smile faded.

"You still here?" he wondered aloud.

"Captain Solo, I'm here to ask you about the Imperial Most Wanted List."

Solo snarled and reached into a metal bin. He pulled out a long hydrospanner, and 'started moving toward me. I stepped away in fear, remembering my earlier conversation with Princess Leia.

"Here. Hold this for a second," he ordered calmly as he slapped the instrument into my hands. He turned and reached into a wiry electronic mess above his head and began working. "I ain't proud of everything I've done in my life, but the Empire's not gonna make me ashamed of it either."

"Are they lying about the smuggling, piracy, terrorism, and hijacking charges, Captain Solo?"

"Hey, take a look around. What do you think? Do I look like a spice runner to you?"

I looked at the *Falcon's* open cargo bays, many of which were undetectable when closed, and decided not to answer truthfully. "Well, I guess not. Still, you have had an interesting past, I'm sure."

Captain Solo smiled. "Interesting? You could say that. I've flown from one side of the galaxy to the other and I've seen a lot of strange stuff. I've worked more jobs than you could imagine, but with a Wookiee for a conscience how much bad could I really get away with?"

I had, of course, heard all about the Wookiee code of honor. "And how do you feel about being considered a hero?"

"Well," he said, "it's not like I'm not used to fame, you know. I made the Kessel Run in less than 12 ... you've heard? I've outraced Imperial starships ... destroying the Death Star is only the latest in my long line of accomplishments. But I have to admit, this Rebellion stuff is certainly different from the things I've done before. It feels ... better somehow, more right. And the people I've met are great! Luke, Leia ..."

At the mention of the Princess's name, a new question popped to mind. "Speaking of Princess Leia, Captain, rumors abound that you think she has feelings for you beyond that of friend and associate."

Solo paled. "I, urn, heard similar rumors." He took the hydrospanner from me and stared at it in fascination and horror. "Her worshipfulness and I agree that those rumors should not be encouraged." He tossed the tool back into the bin and walked into the cockpit. I followed.

The cockpit was in a state of disarray. Every panel and access hatch was open, spilling wires and electronic guts onto the floor.

"What a mess!" I exclaimed before I realized what I'd said.

"We're in the middle of giving the *Falcon* a total overhaul," Solo replied. He sounded a bit miffed. "We've made some special modifications to this ship. She may not look like much, but she's got it where it counts." He paused and turned. "Which is more than I can say about some people."

I ignored his insult and proceeded. "Tell me about sabacc. I hear you're quite the gambler. Rumor is you even won the *Falcon* in a card game."

Now he seemed to be getting really annoyed at me. I guess I was asking the right questions.

"Well it ain't like single-drop, pal, sabacc's a man's game. You wanna learn it, watch a holotape and go play with a droid. And I don't have time to tell you any more stories, either."

"Look, Captain Solo, I'm sorry I'm upsetting you, but I've got a job to do as well. We each serve the Alliance in our own fashion, you know."

The smile he flashed me had all the intensity and cheer of a turboblaster at point-blank range. "Good. Why don't you go serve the Alliance someplace else and let me finish putting the *Falcon* back together. Chewie, show this guy out."

A large furry hand grabbed me from behind and easily lifted me off the ground. I realized that my interview with Han Solo had ended, but now I could begin talking to his Wookiee co-pilot. That

is, if I could convince him not to toss me through the open hatch.

Chewbacca the Wookiee is an interesting character. Large, fierce, and devotedly loyal to Han Solo, the powerful Wookiee has a heart as big as his armspan. A born tinkerer, Chewbacca has been many things during his long life, including slave and smuggler. Now, as a Rebel hero, he has found a home for his unusual talents and combat skills.

And speaking of combat skills, I had no desire to experience his first hand. Though my discussion with Solo had not gone as smoothly as I would have liked, I saw no reason for me and his co-pilot to be at odds.

"Chewbacca, I'm only doing my job," I explained, hoping that he understood Basic. "Alliance High Command wants to prepare an accurate record of these troubled times so that the rest of the galaxy will understand the actions we have taken. This is doubly important now that the Empire is releasing reports such as their Most Wanted list."

Solo appeared at a nearby door and frowned. "Are you still here? Chewie, I thought I told you to..."

Chewbacca's roar actually knocked Solo back.

"All right, all right. Calm down, you old fur face. I'll tell him, I'll tell him." Solo turned to me and said, "He wants me to tell you it's all lies. Whatever 'it' is supposed to be."

Chewbacca roared again.

"Not that list again. Look pal, I'm gonna help you with my friend here, but you've got five minutes. We've got work to do. We're evacuating again, remember?"

I responded hastily, before Captain Solo could change his mind. "Chewbacca, you're not a traitor to your race like the Imperial report indicates?"

Chewbacca roared. "No," translated Solo tersely.

"The Empire says Captain Solo here bought you from slavers, and that you're forced to work for him."

Chewbacca's answer spanned a good minute or so, during which Solo smiled and the Wookiee placed a furry paw on his head.

"Chewbacca and I work together because we like each other. I saved him from slavers, I didn't buy him. The rest of the details are personal and, frankly, none of your business."

This was delicate ground, and I already knew something of the story that was going around concerning Solo and Chewbacca. The story goes that Chewbacca was wandering the galaxy, unaware that his home world of Kashyyyk had been invaded by Imperial troops in order to recruit slaves and ensure Wookiee cooperation. When slavers captured mighty Chewbacca, not all his strength could save him from a period of painful forced labor. But a young Imperial officer named Han Solo sacrificed his career to rescue the Wookiee from bondage.

"Anyway," Solo continued, "Chewie here is chief mechanic and co-pilot of this fantastic ship. he may not have my ability with a hydrospanner, but he's good to have around in a pinch."

The great Wookiee roared in indignation, bellowing so loud the viewports throughout the ship vibrated. Solo tried to match Chewbacca, but his human vocal cords couldn't come close to the volume of an enraged Wookiee.

I leaned close to Captain Solo, shouting into his ear so that he could hear me. "Sir! I've been led to believe that a person should always let a Wookiee win!"

Solo turned to me, his mind obviously thinking through my argument. He turned back to Chewbacca. The Wookiee's eyes gleamed mischievously as he leaned back, his powerful arms resting behind his head.

"You're right, Lieutenant," Solo said, "I should give Chewie his due. In fact, he's much better at keeping this bucket of bolts flying than me, isn't that right, fuzz ball?"

Chewbacca growled agreeably, and I could almost recognize a proud smile shining through his fur and fangs. then Solo pulled a hydrospanner out of his back pocket and tossed it to the Wookiee.

"You're so good, you mechanical genius you, that I'm going to let you put the cockpit back together," Solo beamed. "And I'm going to sit back and watch, just so I can learn a thing or two"

I waited anxiously for Chewbacca to reach out and rip an arm off of Captain Solo's body, as I have heard that Wookiees do such things from time to time, But Chewbacca only laughed in his roaring voice, then picked Solo up and hugged him affectionately. I quietly exited the ship, laughing to myself as Solo half-heartedly screamed for Chewie to let go.

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To: Prefect Talmont
From: Lieutenant Harburik
Subject: Apprehending and detaining suspected subversive #354

Sir, the investigation continues. The subject and his friends will no doubt be apprehended shortly.

The other disk contains the captured encoded datadisk which we believe to be from the subject. Translation efforts on our part have so far proven fruitless, although once we crack the code, no doubt we will have the evidence to convict him.

To: Lieutenant Harburik
From: Police Officer Dokus
Subject: Apprehending and detaining suspected subversive #354

Pursuant to your orders, the apartment was searched. Apparently the subject knew he was targeted for interrogation, because there was evidence of a hasty departure. The apartment itself revealed no clues as to his current whereabouts, although our informants place him as an active member of the Rebel Alliance.

The landlady has been thoroughly questioned. She has no information regarding the target's mission or destination.

All may not be lost, however. One of my officers located a dataped on which several files had been erased. We managed to extract most of the files using standard recovery protocols. However, the contents of the files were coded; we are currently attempting to unravel the codes. I'm certain that these files contain the evidence we require. I have enclosed copies of the files for your perusal.

Imperial Intelligence knows something of the author of these files, Voren Na'al. According to their records, Na'al served for several years as a reporter for the Galactic News Service. He is now assistant to the Rebellion's Master Historian, Arhul Hextrophon. Na'al has been reporting on the traitors intimately involved in the Incident at Yavin.

To: Police Officer Dokus
From: Lieutenant Harburik
Subject: Apprehending and detaining suspected subversive #354

Officer, this datatape may be of some use to us. Our encryptors are currently trying to determine the underlying codes to extract the sensitive information we require.

Good work!

To: Lieutenant Harburik
From: Prefect Talmont
Subject: Search for suspect subversive #354
Harburik, this tape is garbage. The traitor obviously left behind this tape in a foolish attempt to mislead the Empire. Your investigators clumsily blamed several innocent persons. I want them disciplined.

Consider yourself fortunate that you are serving under the command of such an astute bureaucrat as myself; one who is not quite as gullible as you.

Destroy all copies of this nonsense, or I will make sure that this information is placed in your permanent record. It would be a shame to see you stuck on this planet forever.

B-Wing

Captain Keyan Farlander, still a starfighter pilot, helps save a shipment of new B-wing starfighters for the Rebellion, thanks to a little help from the Habassa.

Even as the Habassa contemplate a real alliance with the Rebels, Keyan leads a squadron of B-wings to take out an Imperial research facility where they were attempting to recreate the “uber-shield” technology used by the Ram’s Head in Keyan’s recent victory.

Knowing that the Empire is looking for the Alliance leadership, Keyan leads many B-wing attacks on various Imperial probe droid and patrol targets, slowing their search for the Rebels. The Empire retaliates by sending out a task force under the Relentless to find the Rebels. Luckily, Keyan and other pilots manage, on various missions, to take out much of the task force, then Keyan leads a mission that takes out the Relentless itself.

Finally, as the Rebels prepare to head for their newly-chosen base location, Hoth, the Rebels stage a series of attacks on Imperial targets to cover the arrival on Hoth. The Rebel fleet will be safe on Hoth for the time being, and Keyan, now an even bigger hero than before, is finally promoted to the rank of General.

Rogue Squadron N64

Rogue Squadron is sent to Tatooine for refresher training, but are interrupted by a small Imperial assault. Upon returning to the Rebel fleet proper, the team is then assigned to escort supplies on Barkhesh. Soon after, Rogue Squadron helps search for the Nonnah and extract its crew on Chorax.

Later, the Rebels learn that Imperial officer Crix Madine wishes to defect to the Rebel Alliance. In response, the Empire launches an attack on Corellia, where Madine is hiding, to prevent his departure. Rogue Squadron, with the help of Han Solo and Chewbacca in the Millennium Falcon, fought off the Empire and escorted Madine safely off the planet. Soon after, Rogue Squadron is joined by Gold Squadron, a group of Y-wings now led by Crix Madine; they are dispatched to the moon of Gerrard V to aid its quest for independence from the Empire. While disabling Imperial yachts over Gerrard V, the Rebel force encountered the 128th TIE Interceptor Squadron. Imperial pilot Kasan Moor's TIE fighter was disabled by Gold Squadron during the battle.

When Rogue Squadron informed Moor that she has been taken prisoner, she offered to defect and provide the Rebel Alliance with intelligence on Imperial targets.

With the help of Kasan Moor's intelligence, the Alliance launched three consecutive attacks on Imperial bases throughout the galaxy. After an assault on the Imperial Enclave, a facility on Kile II supporting the Empire's Naval operations, Wedge Antilles was ambushed by a group of TIE fighters and was taken captive. The Rebel Alliance tracked Antilles to an Imperial prison complex on the planet of Kessel. Rogue Squadron organized a rescue on Kessel, liberating Wedge Antilles before he could be transferred to an Imperial prison.

With Wedge Antilles free and Rogue Squadron again at full strength, the Rebel Alliance turned its attention to a new Imperial threat—Moff Kohl Seerdon. Seerdon was consolidating Imperial power in preparation for an attack aimed at capturing Thyferra, a planet producing the healing substance bacta. Rogue Squadron was ordered to disrupt his operation with hit-and-run missions against key targets on Taloraan and Fest.

In retaliation, Seerdon blockaded a city on the planet of Chandrila. Rogue Squadron and the Alliance struck back by initiating a Kasan Moor–engineered raid on an Imperial base located inside a volcano on Sullust. While on Sullust, however, General Carlist Rieekan informed Rogue Squadron that Moff Seerdon used their raid as a diversion and began his attack on Thyferra. With Seerdon in control of the planet's bacta and their own supply threatened, Rogue Squadron quickly reached Thyferra, killed Seerdon, and freed the planet from Seerdon's control.

Underworld: A Galaxy Of Scum And Villany

CMDR MAX SEERDON
IMPERIAL SECURITY BUREAU—INTEL DIV
IMPERIAL CENTER

It is a dark time for the Empire. With the recent destruction of the Death Star a few months ago, the lawless forces of chaos have assailed our shining jewel of stability. The Rebels have joined forces with organized crime. A smuggler from Tatooine aided the Rebels in the transport of top-secret data and the subsequent attack on the Death Star. We can no longer afford to ignore the scum and villainy of the underworld.

The Imperial Security Bureau (ISB) employs a wide variety of agents, informants, and intelligence experts to gather and author our data. I present their reports raw and unedited (for the most part).

Here are their findings, may it please the Emperor.

SYNDICATES

BOUNTY HUNTER'S GUILD

Scay Danson
Imperial Security Bureau
Imperial Center

The Bounty Hunter's Guild has existed as a minor entity for thousands of years, doing steady business in a dangerous galaxy. The Guild consists of 10 major houses: the pre-eminent House Salaktori, the females-only House Renliss, House Benelex, newcomers House Neuvalis, House Paramexor, House Tresario, the Mantis Syndicate, the Ragnar Syndicate, Skine Bounty Hunter College, and the Slaver Syndicate. Some houses specialize in their own specific forms: pursuing males only (Renliss) or murderers (Paramexor), for example. The Guild itself is currently headed by Cradosk, a typical Trandoshan sociopath.

A notable new Guild faction is the reborn Crimson Nova, a group dedicated to the pursuit and capture of the traitorous Jedi Knights and their allies. During the Clone Wars, Crimson Nova was destroyed by the traitor Mace Windu. Nova's leader—a Farghul known as Mika—left prison and returned as head of Crimson Nova. Now it would seem her daughter Breela has come of age and intends to continue the family vendetta against any remaining Jedi.

The Guild's power to cross political and territorial boundaries also gives it undeserved power and freedom—thus circumventing Imperial controls and protocol encountered by ordinary law enforcement and security personnel. Its stability is a threat to the Empire, and any opportunities to disrupt the Guild should be taken.

THE HUTT KAJIDICS

Prefect Eugene Talmont
Arkanis Sector

Older and more corrupt than the Old Republic itself are the Hutt *kajidics*, a loose term applying to clans, "business enterprises," or even the archetypal overclan that the Hutts believe will rule the galaxy one day. Largely operating out of the region classified as Hutt Space, these bloated slugs participate in every kind of graft and vice conceivable: smuggling, kidnapping, fraud, assassination, blackmail, election rigging, loan sharking, gunrunning, hijacking, human trafficking, and cold-blooded murder.

The hermaphroditic Hutts are cunning and patient creatures who see their way of life as a means to an end—survival. For a Hutt, the closer one is to affluence, the further one stays from death. In the cutthroat world of Hutt business, where betrayal is an expected component of any negotiation, this isn't too far from the truth. The Hutts, unsurprisingly, think themselves superior to all other creatures in the galaxy, including humanoids. Further, the mere existence of these gangsters promotes immorality. A documented phenomenon known as "The Hutt Mirror" states that persons in Hutt employment can be driven to unspeakable debauchery merely by concluding, "At least I'm still not as bad as *that* bloated pus-bag."

The most powerful Hutt clans are the *Desilijic* (headed by Jabba Desilijic Tiure) and *Besadii* (headed by Durga Besadii Tai), who have been engaged in a bitter feud for years.

BLACK SUN

Ysanne Isard

Imperial Intelligence Director

Classified

Most sensible beings believe the Black Sun criminal empire is a mere myth—its power, scope, and galactic influence are too staggering to otherwise fathom. In this case, however, the paranoid and demented are actually in the right. For the vast majority of the galaxy, Black Sun simply doesn't exist; in point of fact, the exact opposite is true: There is nothing and no one this sprawling criminal organization does not know about.

Black Sun is controlled by a so-called "Underlord," who employs a council of nine *Vigos* (Old Tionese for "nephew") to run the organization's various nefarious activities and trades. Though Black Sun's leadership was decimated by a Dark Lord of the Sith sometime prior to the Battle of Naboo (See *file 1143.9873-DR*), reports indicate that its efficient infrastructure has since turned that setback into an advantage. After an ambitious lieutenant known as Perhi claimed the mantle of Underlord, he took advantage of the situation to sink Black Sun further into the shadows. Perhi was eventually replaced by Black Sun's current charismatic leader, Prince Xizor of the House Sizhran of Falleen, who has since expanded and streamlined operations from the Outer Rim Territories to the Galactic Core. Under the acumen of Xizor, Black Sun is becoming even more of a threat (and useful tool) than the Hutt crime families; in its feud with the Desilijic, the Besadii *kajidic* has already inextricably indebted itself to the Dark Prince.

Prince Xizor's royal house and family were incinerated in an orbital bombardment ordered by Darth Vader a number of years ago. Xizor has harbored a grudge against Vader ever since that may prove beneficially exploitable in the coming years.

HAN SOLO

Corporate Sector dossier Solo.
H.41201, excerpt

"...Captain Solo, a product of the Imperial Academy, famously breached Corporate Sector security at the maximum security prison on Mytus VII (Stars' End). Solo has continued to operate in Corporate Sector territory and has also been seen in the Tion Hegemony hunting for the treasures of Xim the Despot. Solo is wanted in connection with the death of CSA operative Gallandro, a skilled gunfighter.

"Solo wears the Corellian blood stripes (First Class) and travels with a Wookiee named Chewbacca, whom he rescued from Imperial slavery.

"Solo should be considered armed and dangerous, and is prone to 'shoot-first.' Approach with extreme prejudice.

"All indications show Solo headed back to Imperial space. CSA Security no longer rates him an immediate threat, but he might prove annoying to the Empire in the future."

BOSHEK

Clyngunn
ZeHethbra Smuggler
Interview at undisclosed location

"Boshek? Yah, I know Boshek. That son of a bantha has more warrants for his arrest than I got fur on my face.

"Shekkie came out of Corellia, made a big noise in Smuggler's Run awhile back. Landed himself a very weird gig, running stolen starships for a bunch of religious nuts. Nabbed a Dancing Goddess statue for that Prince Xizor. Bought himself a fast ship called the *Infinity* and beat Han Solo's record for the Kessel Run, even. Boy, Solo ain't gonna be happy when he finds out about that one.

"So Shekkie vaped a couple of TIEs and then disappeared? And no one's seen him since? Check Chalmun's cantina at Mos Eisley. But you didn't hear that from me."

TALON KARRDE

Jix
Sith Stooge
Imperial Center

Talon Karrde is one of the major players of the underworld; most folks just don't know it, and that's not an accident. He's picked up a rep as one of the few infochants (that's an information broker or "sluicer" for you stuffy Imps who never step foot outside your little fantasy lives in the Core) that a sentient with credits can actually trust—more than average, that is. Respectable is a word you rarely hear in the fringe, but Karrde's one of the few barves it gets applied to on a regular basis. I wouldn't call him that, but other folks do.

Karrde recently "inherited" the criminal cartel that belonged to Jorj Car'das, a smuggling kingpin who apparently just up and poofed out of existence like the crowd around an undigested Ortolan. Karrde took over before Car'das' other lieutenants wised up and has worked steadily toward expanding the organization's scope ever since.

Karrde's quiet, and his operation isn't huge, but he's savvy and ambitious, and I'd bet a Biscuit Baron Jolly Meal he's got his sights set on squeezing some mediocre Hutt's operation. I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to take on Jabba himself

SMUGGLER'S RUN

Gavin Zmitt

Office of Grand Moff Tarkin

Cartography

Located out past Wrea and Ryloth on the edge of Wild Space lies an asteroid field that for centuries has harbored smugglers, privateers, and freejacks of all kinds. The locals call it "Smuggler's Run."

There is no plotted course through this field, and all attempts to investigate and enforce the law have been stymied. Only a handful of asteroids are habitable, but their locations are a closely guarded secret—even by the scum who frequent the area. Notable guests include Capt. Han Solo, Ana Blue, Lando Calrissian, Jaril, and Kid Dxo'In (who evidently took Solo on his first Kessel Run).

KEYORIN, THE HUNTER'S WORLD

Code Name: *Diamond*

Imperial Security Services

Toprawa

Keyorin is a globe of vice in the Outer Rim where every brand of illegal activity is condoned and encouraged, with gambling, prostitution, and murder being the most popular. In fact, the planet, nicknamed Hunter's World, is known for its particular appeal to bounty hunters.

The Hunter's World is a mixed hive of low-rent hit men, high-end assassins, two-bit bounty hunters, and occasionally the deadliest of the species. From Clawdites to Filar-Nitzan, the world's attraction is chiefly as a hub for illegal bounty postings. Unlike Imperial-sanctioned postings, illegitimate bounties generally fulfill two purposes: the desire of clientele to acquire certain clandestine and unauthorized results (such as mangling or death of a particular target) while also remaining anonymous, and greedy manhunters' objections to purchasing the requisite permits for lawful Imperial capture of wanted beings. Criminal cartels, syndicates, corporations, and desperate and wealthy citizens alike hire the individuals here for their corrupt needs. The astute pig-faced Pinurquian Tinketh Fo, more commonly known as "Boss," currently runs the world.

Obviously, despite the planet's rampant depravity, it suits Imperial interest to maintain it as is. Though visitors to Keyorin pay no "official" fees for doing business there, Boss always assures his cut of any commerce conducted, and in turn pays tribute to the Empire. It also allows our agents easy insertion for tracking leads on delusional galactic revolutionaries.



SLAVERS

Terrinald Screed

Admiral

Imperial Center

The business of slavery, long illegal though nonetheless practiced in the Outer Rim Territories under the ineffectual laws of the hypocritical Old Republic, was wisely expedited and streamlined by its qualified legalization under Imperial Decree A-SL-4557.607.232. Confining their operations largely to the Rim, there are a multitude of slaver cooperatives, though only three worth mentioning: the Guild of Zygerrian Slavers, the Thalassian pirates, and the relatively new Karazak Slaver's Guild. Of these, the Zygerrians are the most infamous.

The structure and size of the Zygerrian guild makes it beneficial for the Empire to offer slaver permits at reduced cost. Among the different slave types most heavily trafficked by the Zygerrians are native Mandalorians and the Twi'lek (I can personally vouch for the quality of the latter: I myself have owned three). They occasionally deal in the transport of the hearty Wookiees, who were so useful in the Death Star project, though the reptilian Trandoshans continue to monopolize the Kashyyyk market.

AURODIUM SWORD EXECUTIVE SECURITY

*Author Classified
Imperial Security Bureau
Rogue Cell Division*

After the Clone Wars, a number of ARC-class clones deserted or were offered retirement. Many joined the Academy as instructors, but a few struck out on their own. As part of our continuing mission to observe and catalog these rogue agents, we present this report.

Aurodium Sword is a mercenary group offering private security and paramilitary personnel to captains of industry and heads of state. The group is staffed by human mercenaries, Ubese operatives, and Wookiee warrior-bodyguards. The leader and founder of Aurodium Sword is a grizzled vet known as "Muzzle." Informants and intel confirm that he was part of the Alpha batch of ARCs—Alpha-66 to be exact.

Aurodium Sword has taken jobs for clients both Imperial (the Sienar family) and criminal, so the organization's loyalty to the Empire cannot be gauged at this time. However, Muzzle's employment and treatment of Wookiees as actual free beings is troublesome.

LANDO CALRISSIAN

*Imperial Business Bureau, Registry of Complaints
Complaints Regarding: Lando Calrissian (Socorran)*

The IBB keeps detailed records on the 85,000 major business-beings in Imperial territory. Complaints on subject Lando Calrissian are in the top 20 and have earned him the reputation as something of a con man and card shark.

Since leaving Corellia roughly 10 years ago, he won a battered YT-1300 in a *sabacc* game and enlisted a privateer named Solo to instruct him in starship navigation. Ironically, Calrissian later lost his ship, the *Millennium Falcon*, to Solo in another *sabacc* game. He then fleeced the Sharu of a precious relic known as the Mindharp; he was arrested on Oseon for carrying a concealed stingbeam; he is a known *lesai*-dealer; and he openly opposed the Empire during the Battle of ThonBoka.

To be blunt, Lando Calrissian is *not* a reputable businessman.

TYBER ZANN

*Lt. Izbela Saarrj
Imperial Forensic Intelligence
New Crime Vector Warning*

Recently, a new figure has emerged from the underworld: Tyber Zann. Until recently, Zann waged a grudge war with Jabba the Hutt, and the collateral damage suited the Empire.

However, agents of the mysterious Zann have investigated the prototype Eclipse-class Star Destroyer. Might he be planning a brazen heist? We cannot afford to misjudge this new threat.

CONCLUSION

The ISB concludes that the underworld is a serious threat to the Empire. Lawlessness and disregard for authority must not be tolerated. Use of bounty hunters by Lord Vader and high-ranking leaders must be phased out. And wherever possible, the Empire must upturn the fetid logs of the underworld and squash the creatures that flee from our might. ✪

Underworld Appendix: Swoops, Spice, and Wretched Rogues

TO: GRAND VIZIER SATE PESTAGE

FROM: ISB COMMANDER MAXIMILLIAN SEERDON

SUBJECT: UNDERWORLD ADDENDUM

Exalted Vizier,

Greetings. At your behest, I have prepared this postscript to my initial testimonial compilation. I must express that the cynicism displayed by such agents as the Supreme Slavelord of Kessel here and by others in the previous report (including Director Isard!) have left me aghast and speechless. Nonetheless, I've left the reportage unedited as you wish and as an unbiased indicator of the superior ethical sagacity of the Imperial Security Bureau over Imperial Intelligence. I dare say neither the slavelord nor the intelligence director is bound for much future greatness.

Due to rising reports of atypically long-lived, early Kaminoan drones such as CT-1707 and now Alpha-66, I've included the desired update on the mercenary body Aurodium Sword, may it please the Emperor. I've also included the requested profiles and interrogational interviews, and a clarification of the "Kessel Run" to avert any future embarrassments such as that just suffered by Admiral Oicunn.

The Empire is Victorious on All Fronts!

Your humble servant,

Cmdr. Max Seerdon

INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Spice and the Kessel Run

Trioculus, Lord Overseer and Supreme Slavelord, Kessel

Spice is a name applied to any number of mind- or somatic-altering substances, both legal and illegal. Varieties include avabush, carsunum, Crash n' Burn, glitterstim, gy'lan, lumni, ryll, tirefin, yarrock and dozens of others. Glitterstim is both the most recognizable of these and the most infamous narcotic in the known galaxy.

Glitterstim is produced deep within the mines of Kessel by giant arachnids using the substance to weave their webs. Besides the product's legitimate use for medicinal purposes and for bolstering our agents' insight to rival that of a three-eyed man, per the Emperor's desire, controlled quantities of the spice are regularly leaked onto the Invisible Market to keep useful populations like that of Zelos II addicted and at our mercy. This is largely achieved by a corrupt bureaucrat named Moruth Doole, who believes his operation has gone unnoticed.

The "Kessel Run" is a space route that runs near Kessel's irregular black hole cluster known as the Maw, and is often used by smugglers in their illegal transportation of our glitterstim. It is 18 parsecs in distance, though Sith-may-care smugglers often attempt to reduce the distance by skirting suicidally close to the surrounding anomalies. I've allowed an innocent betting pool among the subordinates here concerning the run: unofficially, the fastest Kessel Run "time" is held by the smuggler BoShek (See file 1152.0303-BS), though unconfirmed rumors claim Han Solo (See file 9700.0015-SL) recently set a new record, much to Doole's chagrin.

For clarity, the spice mines of Kessel have no direct relation to the *KescheI* ore mining of the planet Tyne's Horky. Also, because more than one of the Empire's patrols has been had, it's laughably necessary to mention a particular Kessel Run deception popular within the fringe community. Novice smugglers are often tricked into making a phony Kessel Run by transporting avian vermin (referred to as "Kessel" for the con job) that pester the agriculturalists of the

Aeneid system, taking the smuggler on a wild mynock chase. Apparently, the con works just as well on myopic Imperials.

Swoop Gangs

Jaxxon, Lepi mercenary and smuggler, Nar Shaddaa

Swoop gangs, please--don't make me laugh! The whole galaxy's afraid of these swoop gangs. *Oh no! Save us from the swoopers, Jax!* Let me tell you something: these guys are just puffed up womp rats. Make a big noise and they scatter. And this I know from personal experience.

Couple of years ago, it was, back on Aduba III, I got hired by some ugly mug named Han Solo. Joined up with seven other mercs, each one more hard-scrabble than the next. We went up against the Cloud Riders, a bunch of sorry swoop jockeys from the Outer Rim. Chased em off good and proper, with the help of a big behemothy type thing. Can't remember its real name. Alien species were never my forte.

We stopped them, but there are plenty more gangs in the galaxy. You got the Talons, and the Dark Star Hellions outta Seswenna sector, the Nova Demons from near Ord Mantell, the Grave Tusken roam the wastelands outside of Baron's Hed on Sulon... And of course Jabba's gang on Tatooine. I wish they'd pick a catchy name for themselves. Something exciting. Instead, you get folks saying: "Hey who's that gang burning down our farm?" "Oh that's just Jabba's gang." "Hey, what's the name of the gang what dragged the sheriff down the street?" "Jabba's gang." See what I mean? They could really use a better name. Like, *the Krayt Draggers*, or something. What? That one's already taken? Feh!"

ROGUES

Dash Rendar

Gamma Intel Group, Imperial Sec Bureau, Gall

Rendar's family owned the powerful RenTrans shipping conglomerate, and Rendar himself seemed poised for a promising Imperial career—until a careless freighter accident involving his brother Stanton earned him the ire of the Emperor himself. Stanton seemingly died, RenTrans was blacklisted, and the family banished from the Core

Rendar lit out to the Corporate Sector, where, for a brief time he flew guns for one "Uncle" Vanya, a Twi'lek crime boss. Vanya gave Rendar a stock Corellian YT-2400 called the *Outrider* and an incompetent self-styled comedian Rodian for a first mate. The Rodian was killed during the first twenty seconds of Rendar's debut mission, and evidently the Rodian's droid-- an LE-series repair droid answering to "Leebo"-- filled in quite nicely . With the droid's help, Rendar refitted the freighter as a blindingly-fast smuggling ship. Vanya unwittingly paid for the additions, due to some dubious accounting on Leebo's part, but all was forgiven when Rendar saved Vanya's life during a brutal CSA Espo raid.

Curiously, Rendar was seen in Mos Eisley on the very day that Luke Skywalker fled with the stolen Death Star plans. The *Outrider* was berthed in Docking Bay 92 behind Spacer's Row. Rendar had visited Solo earlier at Chalmun's and purchased illegal weapons from Masse Goskey's weapons shop. There he got a tip on a fugitive ex-RenTrans employee, who insisted his brother was alive and had evidence that might clear his name.

The speed with which Rendar blasted out of Tatooine indicates the tip was quite good. If the Empire's intelligence is faulty, and Stanton Rendar is blameless, then the truth could be potentially embarrassing for the ISB. This informant must be found and silenced permanently, before Dash Rendar can learn the truth.

Doc Vandangate

BoShek, star pilot, Clandestine interview at Chalmun's Cantina, Tatooine

"Doc Vandangate is the single best outlaw tech in the galaxy. Hands down. No question. I don't care who tells you otherwise. You heard of the *Millennium Falcon*? A YT-1300 rust bucket making the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs? Ask yourself a question: How is that possible? Doc Vandangate -- that's how.

He works out of the Corporate Sector. He's got a top grade chop-shop... and a beautiful daughter named Jessa. I don't mind telling you, she's half the reason I fly across the galaxy to get my power couplings serviced. Uh. Don't tell Solo I said that.

Vandangate was a big shot, long ago, working for Alkherrodyne Propulsion. Got blamed and blacklisted for all the accidents with the Azaria 66. But anyone who's ever had Doc mod his ship knows it couldn't have been his fault. The man's like an artist with a hydrospanner and a torch.

The old man got himself in a tight spot a couple of years back. He crossed the CSA one too many times and ended up at Stars' End! Lucky for him Jessa put a couple of pirates on the job and managed to bust in there and free him. And then they blew the entire facility sky high for good measure.

Even though Stars' End's molecularly-bonded armor meant the CSA could just stand it up again, the message was loud and clear: Don't mess with Jessa and Doc.

Reginald Barkbone

Grand Admiral Ruffaan Tigellinus, Star Destroyer Avatar, Captain's Log, Carida System

More cutthroat than the Thalassians, more underhanded than the Black Hole Gang, and more preposterous than Gir Kybo Ren-Cha, the Poss'Nomin pirate Reginald Barkbone is the so-called Scourge of the Seven Sectors. What seven sectors this refers to is a mystery to me since I've chased his stolen Star Galleon *Robber Baron* and Incom corsairs from the Colonies to the Outer Rim and back.

As much myth as man, Barkbone's history is a patchwork of speculation. Captured crew members confessed under interrogation that Barkbone lost his leg plundering the palaces of Hapes, lost one of his three eyes and half his face to Imperial Royal Guards while pillaging the principalities of Axion, and lost his mind sailing through the fire rings of Fornax, which I myself witnessed. Barkbone substituted the absent leg with a peg of cybernetic design, though I sadly cannot say the same for his brain.

Barkbone sports a lightfoil appropriated in a recent Tapani raid, infuriating my colleague Admiral Grant to no end. He also speaks Lok Pirate's Cant, though this alone can hardly account for his silly Basic dialect, which wouldn't sound half so absurd if 'twarnt' for the dwarf monkey-lizard perched on his shoulder repeating his every degenerative word.

One way or another, I vow to wipe Reginald Barkbone from the fabric of space forever... then I'll see to that cobalt-colored fellow Captain Thrawn." *End Log.*

TO: ISB COMMANDER MAXIMILLIAN SEERDON

FROM: GRAND VIZIER SATE PESTAGE

SUBJECT: RE: UNDERWORLD ADDENDUM

Commander,

I bid you dark greetings. The Emperor has been in convalescence, but I have passed on the pertinent details of your investigations and he commends you on your thoroughness and moral virility. Intelligence is power, after all, and without power, one dies. Your father would be proud.

Your dedication to the New Order will be rewarded just as soon as His Majesty recovers from his recent excitement. Tell me, would you be interested in a luxury retreat in the Deep Core?

The Empire is Victorious on All Fronts.

Your humble vizier,

Sate Pestage

Pearls in the Sand

"I've found them," slurred the tipsy Mon Calamarian to his companions.

"What are you talking about, Ackli?" one of his Zabrak friends murmured while sipping at his almost-empty tankard.

"I saw them," he hissed, leaning so far across the filthy little table that he looked as though he was sleeping on it. "I found krayts."

At the mention of the fabled dragons, supposedly four to five times larger than the oldest of banthas, the few patrons of the tiny tavern in the remote outpost grew silent. Most dismissed the Mon Calamarian's claims, saying he was drunk or had heat stroke -- or both. But a few pricked up their ears, including two

robed figures near the back of the cantina. As soon as she heard the word "krayt," Dusque Mistflier pulled back her desert robe, revealing a full head of long, sandy-brown hair. She narrowed her gray eyes and strained to hear the Mon Calamarian better. The human was intrigued.

"I saw them," he said, talking more to his tankard now than to anyone else in the cramped cantina, sensing even in his drunken state that no one believed him. Most of the other patrons had gone back to discussing other topics, from the latest moisture vaporator model to the increase of Tusken Raiders east of the tiny outpost of Mos Taike. The topic of dragons was not a new one; the inhabitants of Mos Taike and indeed a good portion of Tatooine had heard of their existence. Not many spoke of seeing the creatures, however, because not many survived such an encounter.

"And I saw where they go to die," Ackli said so quietly that the declaration was nearly lost beneath the mournful whine of the lone slitherhorn player, who continued to play whether or not anyone watched him. As before, several heard Ackli's claim and wondered at the implications.

One of the Zabraks in Ackli's company, his face covered with a variety of tattoos, propped up the Mon Calamarian, none too gently. He demanded, "Could you find the place again?"

Ackli brushed the Zabrak's hands away as though he found them offensive. "'Course I could. I could do it with my eyes closed." As if to prove the point, he closed his eyelids and opened them again.

"If he's telling the truth..." the Zabrak said to the other Zabrak sitting at the small table with the Mon Calamarian.

"... then there might be bones or nests," the other finished for him, "and we both know what that might mean."

Even from her booth, Dusque could hear the absolute greed in the two Zabraks' voices. She turned to her companion, who was lowering his own hood.

"Did you hear that, Tendau?"

As soon as his domed head was visible, the Ithorian regarded Dusque with a look she knew well: one of caution mixed with reproach and resignation.

"I suspect I do, child," he replied slowly, his voice echoing oddly from his twin mouths.

The young woman leaned closer to Tendau's tall frame and whispered, "If they do know where the krayt graveyard is, imagine what that might mean!" She no longer bothered to disguise the growing excitement in her voice.

"Oh, I am imagining what it might mean, make no mistake," the Ithorian said. "Being consumed by krayts, running from greedy treasure hunters..."

"It will be fine." She laid a delicate hand against his long fingers. "This is a real opportunity. Can you picture how impressed Willel will be when we return with genetic samples of canyon krayts? And, just maybe, we'll find that precious item everyone who has ever followed these animals hopes to discover."

Tendau smiled at her genuine eagerness, and Dusque knew she had just about won him over. "We've got enough samples and tissues from feral banthas and bocatts to more than satisfy Willel's request," she said. "It wasn't as if it was the most challenging of missions anyway. Just sandy." She tried unsuccessfully to comb her fingers through her caked hair for emphasis.

"And we won't have another chance to go out again for weeks," she added. "I think the next thing on the agenda is a trip to Naboo for some sort of creature-handler event. You and I both know how boring that will be, watching a bunch of novices who think they understand the nuances of animal behavior strut around with their beasts."

"Not the most glorious of assignments, I agree," Tendau said. "But this--"

--is a once in a lifetime opportunity," said Dusque.

"And if the Mon Calamarian is mistaken?"

"Then we'll have added only half a day or so to our trip, and no harm done." She flashed a big grin as she heard the Ithorian sigh. Dusque knew she had persuaded him.

"All right," he said, "but I hope we will not regret this."

"We won't," she assured him. "I'm certain of it."

* * *

Dusque and Tendau followed the two Zabraks and the now-sober Mon Calamarian for several hours. As soon as they had left behind the few tiny buildings that comprised the isolated post of Mos Taike -- a place so small there wasn't even a shuttleport -- there was little else except sand and wide open space to distract them.

Although Tendau was bulky and had some difficulty maneuvering over the dunes, he kept pace with the smaller, lighter Dusque. Even though their light-colored cloaks and environmental suits offered protection from the suns as well as camouflage on the sand, Dusque could feel a small trickle of sweat roll down between her shoulder blades. If she was already beginning to feel uncomfortable, she could only guess at what the Ithorian was suffering, with his larger frame and somewhat delicate feet. In all their years of service to the Empire as bioengineers, however, Dusque had never once heard him complain of hardship. Tendau's love of all the creatures throughout the galaxy had driven him from his herd ship to service in the Empire, where he could unravel the secrets of nature down to the genetic level. Dusque knew he was willing to sacrifice much for that prize.

And for some reason Tendau had taken a liking to Dusque, the only woman in the elite circle of bioengineers. Her other colleagues tended to regard her with disdain, and she always felt as though she had to prove something to them. She felt as though she were perpetually the new recruit to their ranks and could never hope to bridge the gap between their experience and her own expertise, no matter how hard she tried. The other bioengineers made Dusque feel that she could not rise to their lofty level -- not ever.

It was different with the Ithorian. Perhaps it was simply because they were both strangers on a strange world that they had forged a friendship in the sterile environment of their profession. Or maybe was because they both were genuinely fascinated by nature and what made things tick that they had bonded. For whatever reason, they had become a good team and were

fortunate enough -- or were both disliked enough -- that they were assigned to missions together on a regular basis.

The missions they received were not the best. Typically they found themselves collecting mundane genetic samples of less-than-unusual creatures in some of the most backwater locations in the galaxy. Dusque always listened to those around her, however, and she had more than once stumbled across tales of a creature of unusual size or rarity because of her careful observation. She always managed to convince Tendau to come along with her, and she found that the prizes she discovered were enough to mollify those in charge enough that they overlooked her transgressions. She preferred to ask for forgiveness rather than for permission when on assignment.

The twin suns of Tatooine beat down mercilessly upon the golden sands. Everywhere she turned, Dusque saw only gold and blue in endless expanses. She lowered her hood and wiped the sweat from under her long hair. She turned toward Tendau and saw that he had followed her cue and removed his hood as well.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm--" Before he could get out another word, he was interrupted by the whine of laser fire.

"That sounded like it came from over that dune," Dusque said. She pointed toward the last direction in which they had seen the trio of looters heading. She ran toward the blasts. "C'mon."

As they headed cautiously up the dune, Dusque saw a woolly beast with large, curved horns swing its head up from the other side of the crest.

"Banthas," Dusque whispered as she slowed her pace, "and Wasters."

"It can only be Tusken Raiders," Tendau said, drawing up alongside her.

"Sand People," she hissed. Dusque was well aware of the Sand People's ferocity and penchant for cruelty.

They dropped to the ground and crawled along the hot sand the rest of the way up to the ridge. From their position, they could see a group of three

Tusken Raiders with five tethered banthas near an impromptu camp. Two of the three Tusken had drawn their rifles and were firing on the three fortune hunters from Mos Taike.

"Those greedy idiots stumbled right into them," Dusque said. "And they don't seem to be faring very well," Tendau observed. Dusque looked around and saw little that could help the situation. She had only a simple Twi'lek dagger, and she knew that Tendau had only a survival knife. Neither of them carried any other type of weapon -- certainly nothing that would match a Tusken rifle or gaffi stick. She would have to think of something else. Scanning the scene, she saw only one thing that might work.

"Tendau," she said quietly, "slip down along the south side, and I'll go down the north side. We've got to cut those banthas loose and get them running."

The Ithorian smiled at her plan. "It is about all we can do," he whispered back. "I hope it works."

"So do I."

With that, she started sliding down one side of the ridge as Tendau slid down the other, putting them at opposite sides of the small herd of banthas. Dusque began to cut away at their tethers, hoping that the Sand People would be too distracted by their immediate prey to turn back and check on their mounts. Fortunately, she and Tendau managed to cut every tether undiscovered. She nodded to the Ithorian, and the two of them proceeded to jostle the herd's matriarch until she started to move. Just as Dusque suspected, the rest of the herd followed her lead, and soon every bantha had broken into a run, and Dusque and Tendau barely made it up over the ridge before one of the three Tusken Raiders noticed that their mounts had fled.

Dusque was counting on the fact that the Tusken Raiders were greedy but mercenary. The three opportunists from Mos Taike couldn't have amounted to more than sport to the desert dwellers and were of little monetary value to them, but their mounts would be too precious to lose. As it turned out, Dusque was right.

When the first of the Sand People noticed that their banthas had broken free, he yelled to his companions in their strange tongue. It was only a matter of

seconds before the others gave up their attack on the Zabraks and Mon Calamarian and scrambled to their feet. The three fortune hunters wasted no time in fleeing from their pinned-down position and heading east. They surely wanted what might exist in the graveyard as much as Dusque did, and didn't seem to wonder why their fate had suddenly changed -- they simply took advantage of it. Looking south, Dusque could see the three Sand People diminished against the horizon as they trailed after their mounts. She and Tendau had remained undetected by both parties.

"Let's keep going," she told the Ithorian, and they continued trailing the former cantina patrons.

For the next thousand meters or so, little happened. Dusque and Tendau kept a discreet distance from the trio, remaining mindful that other Raiders might be lurking between the shifting dunes. They grew more and more tired as they trudged farther into the desolate desert, but they could not stop to rest because their quarry did not. Even though there was only the slightest breeze, it was enough to cover the trio's erratic tracks in only a few moments. Dusque was concerned they would lose their trail if she and Tendau slowed their pace, so they pushed on. Dusque hoped they were nearing the location the Mon Calamarian had spoken of back in Mos Taike, but her mind started to churn over what they were going to do with their competitors once they got there. It turned out not to be much of an issue.

As they climbed up another steep incline, Dusque turned back to check on Tendau. She could see that he had tired tremendously but wouldn't say a word to indicate it. She couldn't let her zeal for the potential prize wear him down any further.

"Why don't we stop for a while?" she said, surprising herself with her own raspy voice.

"I was thinking the exact same thing, little lady," Dusque heard from behind her. She whirled around to see the trio lined up on the other side of the dune where she and Tendau were standing. The two Zabraks had small holdout blasters drawn. The Mon Calamarian stood slightly behind them with an almost ashamed look on his face, as though he couldn't believe the manners of the company he was keeping.

The one who had spoken motioned to Dusque and Tendau with his blasters. They were in no position to argue, so they climbed down the slope to stand in front of the armed Zabrats.

"And just who might you be?" the second one demanded. "Chasing after our treasure?" The first Zabrak shot him a look, and Dusque thought he must have been afraid that his companion had already revealed too much.

"Look," Dusque started to explain, raising her slim, white hands in the air in a gesture of someone trying to fend off an argument, "we're not trying to steal anything you think is yours. My colleague and I are Imperial bioengineers under Emperor Palpatine, and we --"

"Bloody scientists!" The first Zabrak spat and raised his blaster. Dusque realized she might have just sealed their fate, as there were many who hated the Emperor and his servants, especially this far from the Core Worlds.

"Wait," the other Zabrak said. "I'm not prepared to shed blood over these pearls, and I'm definitely not prepared to have the Empire breathing down my neck any more than it already is. I've got a better idea."

"What do you have in mind?" the first asked, and Dusque could hear that the anger in his voice had been replaced by the emotion felt by many who believed themselves to be on the wrong side of the Empire: fear.

"Let's let the desert claim them," the second said. "By the time anyone finds them, they'll be mostly bones. I'm sure, given their line of work, it wouldn't be the first time one of them met with a fatal accident."

"That's a good point," the Mon Calamarian chimed in. He seemed eager to avoid bloodshed as well.

The first Zabrak, who had been so eager to blast them, took their knives and waved them to sit down. "One of those knives is mine," the second Zabrak said.

As Dusque and Tendau followed the Zabrak's orders, the wind picked up, and although there was still at least half an hour before the second sun of Tatooine set, darkness fell quickly.

"Sandstorm coming," the Mon Calamarian shouted to be heard over the growing howl of the wind. "Just leave them. The sand beetles will take care of them."

The second Zabrak had yanked Dusque's arms behind her back and was lashing them together when visibility dropped to nearly nothing. "Good enough," he shouted to his twin, and the trio took off still maintaining an easterly direction as best as Dusque could tell.

As soon as they were out of sight, Dusque shouted, "Are you all right?"

The Ithorian managed a rueful smile. "You do manage to get us into the most interesting predicaments," he yelled back. Dusque rose to her feet and stumbled in the darkness, kicking at the ground. With the reduced visibility, it took a few moments before she felt the thud she was hoping for. She dropped to her knees and groped until she found the jagged rock she had kicked. Dusque began to saw her bindings against the stone.

"I'll be right there," she shouted. She realized that, in the midst of the swirling sand that bit her face, she had no idea where Tendau was. She was momentarily confused. It took only a little effort to cut through the leather thong that the Zabrak had used to bind her. Now she had the daunting task of finding Tendau.

"Tendau!" she shouted above the howl. She turned about wildly and tried to remember which direction she had taken when she had begun searching for the rock. She tried to slow her breathing and calm her heart, realizing that she was verging on panic.

As she decided which direction to take, she noticed the sandstorm was weakening. She remembered, now that she had regained some composure, that these storms never seemed to last long on Tatooine. Like many of its indigenous animals, Tatooine's sandstorms were quick -- and often deadly.

As she wandered through the boneyard, Dusque marveled at how many of the creatures had passed away, each one inexplicably drawn to the same spot.

"Tendau!" she called again when she thought she saw his bent form ten meters away. Even as she raced back to him, she was amazed at how far she

had actually walked. She shook her head at the power of disorientation that the short storm had wrought.

As she dropped to his side, Dusque noticed with concern that Tendau was hunched over. Then she realized he had assumed that position to hide the domed head perched atop his long, curving neck.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she untied his hands.

"As usual," he finally answered, "I believe I am as all right as you are." The sandstorm had nearly abated, and Dusque could see his gentle smile.

She smiled in return, but her expression faded to a wince when she saw his bloody wrists. Obviously, he had been struggling against his bonds the entire time she had been looking for a way to free herself and she realized that nothing was worth the pain of seeing her friend injured.

As she helped him to his feet, Dusque said, "it won't take us too long to return to Mos Taike now that we aren't trailing them any longer. C'mon." She moved to turn back, but the Ithorian remained steadfast.

"It would be incredibly wasteful to retrace our steps when we are so near to our goal," he said.

"You want to go on?" she asked, incredulous.

"Don't you?"

"Yes... I do."

"Then let's continue," he said, taking the lead. "I don't think they could've gone too far with the storm."

Dusque shook her head and smiled, partly at her companion's resiliency and partly at his loyalty. He knew how this quest had caught her attention and how she hated to leave anything unfinished. And he was willing to see it through to the end. She was touched by the prize she already possessed: his friendship. As they tracked the mercenary trio as best they could, one thing nagged at Dusque. She mulled it over and over, and then she finally mentioned it to Tendau.

"You know what seemed strange?" she said. "The fact that he called what we are searching for 'pearls.' Didn't that seem a bit odd? I mean, I guess they do resemble pearls somewhat, but why would he have chosen that --"

"Look," Tendau interrupted and pointed to something at the eastern end of the rift they were standing atop. Glinting in the starlight was what looked like a series of white arches, perfectly shaped and perfectly spaced apart. Even from a few hundred meters away, Dusque realized what they were.

"Krayt bones," she breathed. She grinned at Tendau and was ready to run down the hill. But before she could take a step, the now-familiar whine of lasers cut through the night. There were multiple blasts, and they were growing louder. Dusque and Tendau, seeing only scrub and brush around them, dropped to the cooling sand for cover. A moment later, the Zabraks and the Mon Calamarian appeared at the eastern end of the rift, running in the opposite direction. Every once in a while, one of the Zabraks turned and fired behind them, but for the most part they simply ran as fast as their legs would carry them. They were nearly out of sight, and Dusque was beginning to question their sanity when a cry ripped through the night.

Coming out of the darkness from the eastern end of the rift were not one but three krayt dragons. Dusque held her breath in awe. She had studied the information on the creatures -- or what little information existed on them -- but she had never dreamed she would be so close to one, let alone three. The first two were much larger, so she guessed the third was a juvenile. All three had the distinctive crown of five horns, and their bodies were greenish. Even from where they lay, Dusque could see the large spines protruding from every part of their armored skin, and the twin spikes at the end of their tails.

As best as she could estimate, the smaller krayt must have been as tall as two average humanoids at the haunches, while the older dragons were at least twice as big as that. It was supposed that the animals continued to grow until death. If that were truly the case, Dusque wondered how old the specimens in front of them might be.

Just as quickly as the dragons had appeared, they disappeared in the opposite direction, still in pursuit of the three intruders.

"It looks like our 'associates' have drawn the animals out for us," Tendau said quietly, although there was no need for whispers.

"Let's not waste the chance," Dusque replied, starting to run down the hill where the krayts had appeared, the Ithorian directly behind her.

As they entered the rift, Dusque could hardly breathe. There were not just one or two skeletons, but hundreds upon hundreds. As she wandered through the boneyard, easily passing through the partial ribcages as though they were tunnels, Dusque marveled at how many of the creatures had passed away, each one inexplicably drawn to the same spot. The place reminded her of some of the other creatures she had encountered in her work, animals that always returned to the same place to spawn. Some of those creatures were known as "terminal spawners," because they died soon after reaching their destination. Dusque hoped that was the explanation in this case.

As Dusque and Tendau moved deeper into the rift, passing skulls and the remains of claws, something winked reflected starlight from the sandy ground. Dusque moved toward it as her colleague reminded her, "We best collect what samples we can. I don't think we have much time." Nestled in the center of one of the many ribcages was an object nearly the size of Dusque's head. She hefted the thing up and held it out for a better look. Its surface was a creamy color, and the object glowed softly. It was perfectly smooth, and Dusque realized that the krayts, like many reptilian species, must swallow stones and churn them around in their gizzards to aid digestion -- perhaps for years.

"Pearls," she said, and although the boneyard was an odd place for it, she burst into laughter. "Pearls," she said again, almost breathless.

"Dusque," Tendau said. The tone of his voice caused Dusque to whip her head around.

She gasped and let the krayt pearl fall to her feet.

"Ohhh," she said in awe.

* * *

In the tavern, a few of the newly arrived travelers from Mos Espa sat around the bar. After a few Tatooine Sunburns, the talk turned to the fabled canyon krayts and their treasures.

"I heard that the graveyard is littered with their pearls, each one worth a fortune," said a young Rodian to his female companion. "I'll find one for you," he told her before stealing a kiss. She giggled delightedly.

"Don't be stupid," a human snapped at him. "Not only is there no graveyard, there's no such thing as a krayt or a pearl. All that you'll find out there are some giant sand beetles that will be more than happy to make a meal out of you." He and his companions shared a hearty laugh.

"He's right," came a strong female voice from the back of the room. In a dark corner of the tavern, a cloaked figure rose, left her hooded companion, and walked to the bar.

The woman pulled back her hood to reveal a head of light-brown hair full of sand and dust. Her gray eyes twinkled with delight. "There *is* such a thing as a krayt, and there are fortunes beyond belief out there, just waiting for discovery."

Not to be outdone by the young woman, the human who had discouraged the Rodian demanded, "And how do you know?"

"Because not only have I been there, I have brought back one of their treasures."

The room grew silent in anticipation. Dusque lifted a sack onto the bar and carefully opened it. Slowly, she withdrew a single, pearl object and held it with great reverence high in the air.

"Aww," the Rodian moaned. "That's no treasure, just a worthless egg." And the patrons returned to their drinks, disappointed.

But Dusque heard none of it. She stared at the gleaming krayt egg and sighed, "Priceless."

Differences of Opinion

Garm Bel Iblis glared across the conference table in the dimly lit room. He was angrier than he had ever been. And the woman he was angry with was once one of his closest associates: Mon Mothma, former Senator of Chandrila.

"Mon Mothma," growled the Corellian Senator, barely containing his temper, "I am forced to disagree. The course you are embarking on is foolhardy. I request that you postpone -and reconsider-the attack on Milwayne."

Mon Mothma held her composure. As always. "Senator Bel Iblis," she began, "you are more than welcome to your opinion, but in this case, you are overruled."

"Overruled! You must be joking," the Senator exploded, his fists slamming down on the table. "There is more to this at stake than your personal grab for power! Lives are at stake! My troops' lives!"

The regal Corellian was livid with barely contained rage. For once, Mon Mothma seemed to lose her temper as well.

"My 'grab for power' as you call it, is an attempt to save those same lives. Look past the end of your own nose, Garm. There's a great deal more at stake than your pride." She calmly turned to a young Mon Calamari, preparing to order the attack.

Bel Iblis hated it when she was convinced she was right: there's was no talking to her. "My troops will not participate in such a foolish maneuver. I have lost enough friends," he said softly, gesturing at a third, empty chair, adding, "and so have you, I would think."

Mon Mothma glared angrily at the Corellian. "That's cheap, Garm. Bail would have approved of what I'm trying to do."

"Would he? Would he really? Bail was as opposed to military action as you were in the beginning. The two of you outvoted my every suggestion concerning military matters from day one." He shook his head in disgust. "With Bail gone, you're proceeding with military actions against my recommendations? It

sounds to me like you are just solidifying your power base. I doubt very much that Bail would approve." He crossed his arms and stared defiantly across the table at Mon Mothma.

Mon Mothma stood up angrily. "I am not setting myself up in Palpatine's place! The attack on Milvayne is necessary, and it will go ahead as planned. The vote was cast, and Bail approved of the attack before ..."she paused, blinking back sudden tears at the thought of the destruction of Alderaan. "... before *it* happened," she concluded. "Bail Organa agreed that the attack was required to shut down Imperial control in Gyrica system." She glared at Garm Bel Iblis. "I would have thought, with your 'man-of-action' mentality, you would have jumped at the chance to attack an Imperial garrison."

"It's not an Imperial garrison. My sources indicate that Milvayne is an Ubiquitorate base," he paused, hoping he could make the stubborn diplomat see some reason. "An Ubiquitorate base is not something my troops are prepared to deal with. And neither are yours."

"Our Intelligence sources do not agree with yours," Mon Mothma said simply.

"I don't care," the Corellian yelled, pounding the conference table emphatically. "Do you understand me? I will not send my troops on a suicide attack. And I do not recognize your authority to order them to. I did not vote to place you in charge of the Alliance, and if Bail did, then he was gravely mistaken." Bel Iblis was shaking with frustration.

"Senator Bel Iblis," Mon Mothma said quietly, after a brief pause, "I sincerely hope that was not an ultimatum."

Momentarily taken aback, Garm Bel Iblis bowed his head. "Yes," he said quietly. "I guess it is. This attack plan is fundamentally flawed, and you just don't have the expertise to know it."

Mon Mothma stood abruptly and said, "I will not have ultimatums put to me, Senator. The Rebel Alliance will no longer require your services."

Garm Bel Iblis met her gaze evenly. "As you wish."

He turned to leave, and pausing, added, "I'm not your enemy ... the Empire will defeat us all if we cannot rely on each other." Storming away, he left the room

behind, wondering if the Rebel leader inside the conference chamber would be able to live with the mistake she was making. Bel Iblis knew he couldn't. And Mon Mothma had yet to learn if she could.

Wretched Hive Of Scum And Villany vignettes

A Few Words From Cohden K'Reye...

I know what you're thinking, pal....

Right now, you're saying to yourself: *Self, do I really want to lay out 20 credits for some Corellian smoothie to tell me what I already know about the most banal subject in the entire galaxy?*

For the uninitiated (and those of you who fall into this category should just put this treatise down now and go home to your mommies), the subject 'bout which I'm speaking is known by a multitude of monikers throughout the galaxy.

Club, cantina, bar, saloon, lounge, tapcafe, emporium....

They all refer to the same kinda place.

And if you ever left your desert hovel, farmboy, it's a sure bet you'd find at least one of these establishments in the big, bright city.

Now some people (and these are the know-it-all types who have their noses juttied so high in the air they're sniffing vacuum) think that every cantina is the same; that boredom hangs in the air as thick as the smoke from a Hutt's joonga pipe.

Of course, these are also the micron-minded folks who believe they've seen it all and tend to lump everybody and everything into broad categories. To them a Wookiee is a Wookiee, and hey, they make pretty good slaves, don't you think? Not that I'm comparing these folks to Imps, mind you, but if the slaver's whip fits, hold it.

So they may think a bar is a bar is a bar, but as with everything from sentient beings to droids, the differences make the difference. Sure, if every cantina you walked into was a clone of the one before, you'd have your fill pretty quickly—and I'm not sayin' there aren't plenty of those out there. However, that's where me and this little work of mine come in....

It's sort of a guide through the perilous paths of platitudinal pubs. I'll show you some of the best the galaxy has to offer; places where you can eat drink, dance, gamble, meet, flirt, deal, whisper, laugh, or just relax. Each establishment in this little piece of literature has its own unique flavor. You can sample 'em like sweet-treats, but don't gorge yourself. These babies are quite capable of givin' you a tummy-ache.

Moderation is the key. Besides, there's lots you can do at each place...Chat with a bartender in the know, find a pilot for your clandestine journey, meet new and interesting beings, buy and sell legal-impaired (meaning "black market," farmboy) goods, seek out underworld contacts, and maybe even get into a few of those grand old bar-clearing brawls.



**COHDEN
K'REYE**

These are the type of establishments where the uncommon is commonplace. So be ready for anything...That beauty who comes up and asks you to dance might just be an Imperial spy. That drink she bought you could be laced with a sleep inducer. And when you wake up at an Imple Interrogation facility, her diaphanous cocktail dress has been replaced with an ISB standard issue uniform.

Don't say I didn't warn you. (And don't try to sue me, either. Didn't ya read the fine print?)

By the way, the correct answer to the question I originally posed is a big ol' Death Star-sized YES. If you're an adventurin' type, then you'll make good use of the data you hold in your grubby hands. As my Uncle Urrtie always used to say, *The 20 credits you lay out today can save you a lot of moss gathering stones in a hard place.* Come to think of it, Uncle Urrtie wasn't the sharpest vibroblade in the armory....

Well, that's about it for my little introduction, which I'll have you know I'm working on in one of my favorite hang-outs, The Binary Bar on Venaari. I find that the atmosphere gets the creative juices flowing.

Hold on a microsec, friends, I've got an ugly-looking Barabel standing in my light....

Can I help you?

Your table?

That's strange...I just checked and it doesn't seem to say "Ugly Nerfherder" anywhere on it.

I don't know, do you think it was supposed to be funny?

What?

For your information, my sister's never even been to Gamorr...But since you brought up the subject of exotic locations, I think visiting a sonic shower should be tops on your travel itinerary, pal.

Pardon me?

Actually, I don't think such a thing is anatomically possible.

Hold on, pal, you're not a Jedi are you?

Why? 'Cause by the way your hand keeps moving towards that blaster, you must think you got the Force on your side or something.

Excuse me, gentlebeings, this won't take but a moment....

The Ace of Sabres

"A gambler's paradise if ever there was one. Sabacc tables stretch from wall-to-wall, but if that's not your cup of lum, take heart...Nearly every game of chance ever devised is ready and waiting to take your money. With 99 levels and 1,001 different amusements, they say you can't lose at the Ace. But I wouldn't bet on it."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

Don't believe everything you scan through your datapad. Sure, the Ace's promo-vids are gonna say the place is safe. I mean, who in his right mind is gonna say, "Hey, come visit us, you're likely to get vaporized!"

Don't get me wrong. The Ace is perfectly safe unless certain people behind the scenes decide otherwise. Robbery, assassinations, thievery, and other dastardly doings ain't as rare as a smart Gamorrean. In fact, they happen more often than you'd probably care to hear about.

I personally know of more than a few beings who took a walk in the woods and got themselves lost. Permanently lost.

Even the most cautious of us can be distracted by the sums of money floatin' around. You can either watch your credits or you can watch your back. I guess it depends on what's worth more to you....



Sometimes You Win...

Tovric couldn't believe how easy it had been...He was sitting at the Liar's Cut table, watching the dealer send a new round of cards to each player with a dramatic spin. He made a show of checking them, but his attention was focused on the being to his left.

Ambassador Kollrin's focus was the cards he had been dealt, and from the way his thick jowls dropped, the results were not good. The rotund Sullustan let out a sigh, and began adjusting his cards, as if hoping they would suddenly improve.

Tovric grinned in amusement. Like most politicians, the Ambassador could lie as easily as breathe, but Kollrin didn't have much of a sabacc face. No wonder the big load of bantha fodder hadn't won a single hand yet....

"I guess it's just not my day," Kollrin said suddenly.

Shocked from his thoughts, Tovric quickly recovered his composure, nodding in sympathy with the Ambassador. *If you only knew how right you were about that!*

Kollrin folded his cards. "Better quit while I'm still in the light side. It's getting a bit late, anyway." The Ambassador yawned as he gathered his chips, gesturing for his private security man to escort him back to his room. The guard left his post at the entrance and began moving through the crowded casino.

Tovric had to act immediately. He slipped a hand into his pocket, withdrawing a standard stylus from his coat pocket. He tapped a small control stud, and a 30 centimeter long monomolecular blade sprung from its tip. *So much for the vaunted Ace of Sabres security staff*, he thought as he prepared to strike at the Ambassador's fleshy neck.

Kollrin saw the flash of the blade, but it was too late. The chips spilled from his hands as his eyes widened in surprise.

"This is for all those you've sentenced to death," Tovric snarled as he drove the blade forward.

Out of nowhere, a hand suddenly locked around the would-be assassin's wrist. The grip felt so much like durasteel, Tovric thought a droid had seized him.

Tovric turned around and saw that it was actually a human who had restrained him. Thin and wiry, the man was still managing to crush Tovric's wrist without much effort. He wore black armor and a scarlet cloak, but what drew Tovric's attention were the eyes. Mirrored pupils reflected Tovric's terror back at him.

The pain in his arm drove the assassin down to his knees, and the man locked his other hand around Tovric's neck.

"No one dies here unless I wish it," the man said in a voice just above a whisper and utterly devoid of emotion.

The assassin suddenly realized who he was facing.

Dunan Par'Eil.

Tovric found himself staring into those horrid eyes again...And the last thing he saw was his reflected image as he lost consciousness.



ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

They say those who know the Force, know all. Well, actually they don't really sat that—I just made it up—but it sounded pretty blasted convincing didn't it?

I've never been one to rely on the arcane for enlightenment. I mean, Jedi powers are all well and good if you believe all the hype, but sometimes whispers in the wind can offer their own stimulating insight.

Listen close and you might just overhear that good ol' Dunan hasn't exactly severed all ties with the Empire. The Emperor rarely lets his top agents leave with all of his secrets snug in their little heads. According to some accounts, Par'Ell once wore the ol' scarlet suit, and perhaps he still does...I hear he took his current job to keep close tabs on the rich and infamous of the galaxy who frequent the Ace.

Like I always say...Trusting an ex-Imp is a good way to join the ranks of the ex-living.

Exovar's Emporium

"The cavernous Emporium boasts a staggering collection of artifacts, oddities, and trinkets gathered during the travels of its owner, ex-scout Luskin Exovar. He's a few motivators short of a working hyperdrive, but old Exie's personable enough and he's got more stories than the Empire has Star Destroyers (and most of 'em are about as long). By the way, the mounted AT-AT head on the wall is real. Now that's a great story. Ask him about it...when you've got some spare time."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..
K'REYE, COHDEN

Gather round, boys and girls, gentlebeings and aliens...Ol' Uncle Cohden has got a little story for you.

Y'see, a long time ago, in a galaxy not too far away, during the last days of the Old Republic, one of the most infamous independent scouts to ever chart the spaceways decided to retire. Like any good explorer, he sensed that a dark storm was brewing on the galactic horizon and decided to seek shelter before things got too dangerous.

He sold off nearly all of his assets and withdrew his considerable fortune, which had been distributed among a multitude of banks under a number of false names. The man loaded his faithful ship with his money, everything he collected in his legendary travels, and his faithful companion droid, Spanner. And then he disappeared, never to be heard from again.

What happened between that point in time and the present is the one story that Luskin Exovar refuses to recount...

Now, as far as I know, only two other people (and I use the term loosely) know what happened: Exovar's companion droid Spanner and his weird little alien sidekick, Redeye. I can tell you this much...The droid ain't talkin' and you can't understand a word of what the fraggin' lizard says.



ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..
K'REYE, COHDEN

As its visitors quickly discover, Exovar's is one of those places that tries extremely hard to defy rational explanation. They always say it's usually best to start at the beginning, so here goes.

Don't say you weren't warned....

The Story of Exovar and the AT-AT

"So, there I was, crouched in the darkwoode tree branch, twenty meters—well more like twenty-five—above the lush jungle floor. All I had was my trusty laser cutter, and let me tell you, that baby was down to half of a full charge. I'm waiting there, as quiet as can be, when all of a sudden, I hear this great, 'THUMP, THUMP' echoing all around me. Then the ground starts shaking, and in the distance I hear vegetation and trees being smashed to kindling.

"The worst part was the waiting, and I don't mind telling you, for a microsecond there I was ready to give up, turn tail, and head for greener pastures. But then I saw that metal monstrosity lumbering through the beautiful rainwoods that I had just discovered and I said to myself, 'This just ain't right. No way am I gonna roll over like a Rodian and let these ugly Imps transform my forest into some prefab garrison.'

"Fury overwhelmed the fear. Even though each impact of the leviathan's leg set my teeth chattering, I readied myself to take the offensive. When that big ol' AT-AT passed underneath, I let out a Wookiee war whoop and leapt onto its back.

"Well, I felt just like the proverbial bloodflea on the Hutt. It was armored hide far as the eye could see... With no other recourse, I lifted my laser cutter—Did I mention she was down to a quarter charge?—and jabbed it into the beast's back. Well, much to my chagrin, there wasn't so much as a mark on that durasteel surface. Things were looking bleak, to say the least.

"Then I remembered one of my granddaddy's old sayings: *Boy, he used to say to me, without a good head*

on your shoulders, you're just plain headless. Granddaddy used to nip at the lum quite a bit as I recall, but the saying sparked an idea. I hurried over to the front of the AT-AT and sure enough, the tubing that connected the monster's head to its body was a classic Imperial design flaw begging to be exploited.

"I jabbed my laser cutter at the apex of the neck and jumped off, hoping this time the Force would favor the foolish. As I fell, that lovely little laser beam continued to cut, slicing through the neck of the beast like a miniature lightsaber. The whole left side tore free and I couldn't help but cry out in victory. 'Course that yell turned a bit higher-pitched when my cutter's beam ran out of resistance. Suddenly that old sour biddy known as gravity called me home for supper, and all she was serving up was some nice hard ground.

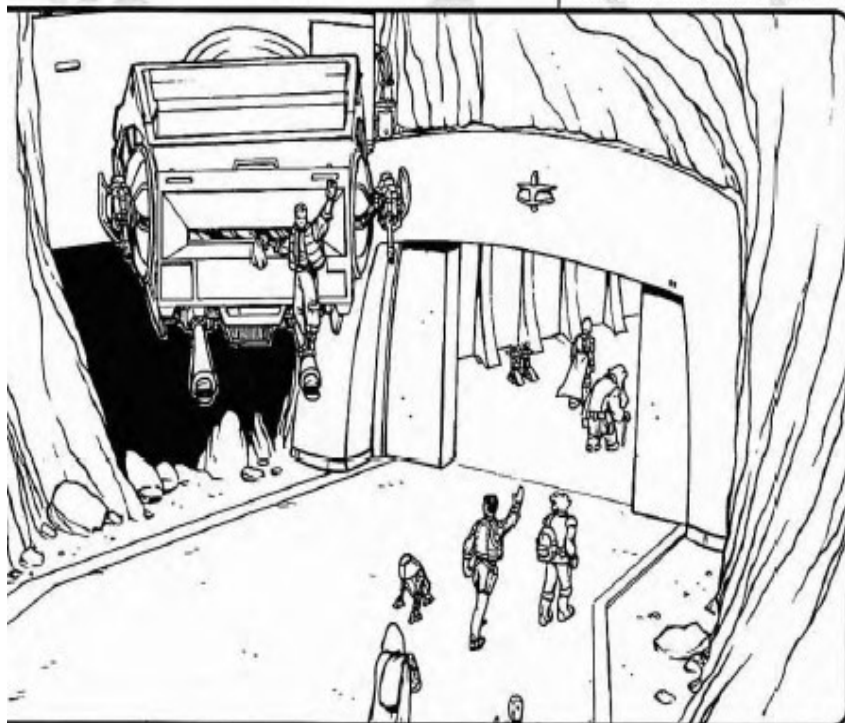
"I closed my eyes and prepared to meet my long lost ancestors, when all of a sudden there's this huge 'SPLASH,' and I find myself sinking into something big and blue. Roll me in fur and call me a Wookiee if I didn't land in the prettiest little pond you ever laid your oculars on... I guess the Force *was* with me. There I am paddling back to the surface of the water, when I'm greeted by a sight to warm a sithspawn's heart.

"That ugly ol' AT-AT's head is swinging at a perpendicular angle to the rest of the body, when 'WHAMMO,' the brute shakes hands with the biggest darkwoode tree you ever did see. There's this great screech—sounded to me like a Herglic losing his last credit on sabacc—and then that sturdy ol' Imp walker keeps on walkin', only without a head. Without anything to control it, that monstrosity of a body veered off and took a stroll off a very steep drop.

"As for the head, it was sitting there nice as you please, about ten meters away. A pair of Imps were stumbling out like they were on shore leave and just left last call at the local bar. Trying to be neighborly, I hurried on over and made sure to greet them boys. I even brought five of my closest friends along to lend a hand—well more like a fist.

"With nothing else to worry about for the time being, I examined that remaining bit of Imp technology—it was pretty sturdy to survive that fall—and commented to myself....

"Well, I guess that's one way to get ahead."



**ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..
K'REYE, COHDEN**

Just a note on Exovar and his prices....

He may be a little loopy and can generate more wind than a Tatooine sandstorm, but when it comes to important matters, Exie's the kind of guy who makes business a pleasure.

He cuts nice deals for his friends, doesn't gouge mere acquaintances, and has allowed more than a few down-on-their-luck spacers house credit for whatever they need.

As rough and tumble as Exie seems, he's got a soft spot for adventurers, explorers, scouts, and anybody else who's fallen on hard times.

A lot of shady stuff may go down in the Emporium, but no matter how deep the bantha fodder flows in there, Luskin Exovar's boots remain clean.

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

At this point, you're probably saying to yourself, "Wait just a microsecond! With such a wide variety of dangerous and diverse folks, how could the Emporium be a safe place to visit?" While Exovar likes to say there truly is honor among the rogues of the galaxy, the fact that he employs two assassin droids as security guards introduces a nice dash of fear...you know, to reinforce the honor part.

Of course, ol' Exie is always dropping hints that his twin terrors have more than a few of their siblings locked away for safekeeping. He might be bluffing. He might not be... You gonna bet your life on it, slick?

Exovar likes to think of the Emporium as neutral ground (for everyone but the Empire, of course). While egos can never truly be checked at the door, the relaxed atmosphere keeps things cool. Anyone who acts inappropriately is immediately removed from the premises in a unique manner. The offenders are stripped of all their gear, tied up with ultracord, then dropped out in the wastelands in the middle of the night. If they're lucky, they'll freeze to death before Neftali's voracious predators show up.

As Exovar likes to put it, "I just round 'em up and let the modrols sort 'em out." Understandably, disturbances at the Emporium tend to be few and far between.

In many ways, the Emporium resembles the legendary thieves' guilds of some ancient civilizations, where even the most hardened criminals could co-exist (for a short time, at least) without killing each other.

Beastie Chow

It was so brutally cold, Kaori Batta had canceled the hunting expedition. Everyone was more than happy to reschedule. Everyone, that is, except for Ghecharo. The arrogant noble demanded that the hunt go on as planned, claiming his royal itinerary could not suffer any sudden changes.

Batta wasn't in the mood to argue with the self-important blowhard, since the dispute would most likely end with Ghecharo's one percent noble blood spilled all over the Emporium's floor. And Exovar wouldn't be too happy about that.

So the hunter relented, and decided the best course of action would be to just take Ghecharo and his adjutant, Kleck, out into Neftali's fierce weather until the duo started crying to head back inside or froze like a pair of sabersicle treats. Either way, Batta was getting paid. Though the hunter generally liked to return with everyone he left with, in this case he'd be glad to make an exception.

Batta paused atop an icy bluff, staring at the sea of freshly fallen powder below. The howling winds whipped the hunter's modrol-pelt cloak around him, as he surveyed the mountainside with a pair of worn macrobinoculars.

Huffing-and-puffing, the wiry nobleman joined the hunter. The shorter and heavier Kleck, already burdened by his master's pack and weapons, was having a hard time walking through the thick carpet of snow. He seemed to sink with every step.

"Well?" Ghecharo asked, a none-too-subtle hint of irritation in his voice. "We've been out here an entire half-hour and haven't seen so much as an ice-rat."

Batta briefly wondered what the nobleman's grating voice would sound like muffled by ten meters of snow. "Patience is a hunter's greatest advantage."

Then the nobleman snorted, increasing the nasal quality of his voice. "Only if you intend to bore your prey to death."

Kleck's usual burst of sycophantic laughter, which sounded every time Ghecharo attempted a humorous statement, was cut mercilessly short by the howling winds.

Ghecharo gestured

at the rocky cave entrance Batta was currently studying. "That looks good."

The hunter lowered the macrobinoculars and shook his head. Ghecharo immediately challenged his guide's opinion. "There's no sign of a modrol?"

"Actually, there are quite a few. Heavy claw impressions at the entrance and blood smears on the floor." Batta turned away from the sight. "That cave is definitely occupied, and it's got what amounts to a big 'Do Not Disturb' sign outside of it."

"What are you talking about? If there's a modrol in there, I want to go and kill it."

Batta favored the nobleman with an expression of pity. "What you have in that cave is an injured modrol. Big one, too, by the size of those claws. These beasties are extremely dangerous to begin with. This one is *injured*. Now, you set foot in that cave and all of a sudden he's cornered, too." The hunter gave a rueful laugh. "You get dealt a hand like that in sabacc and it's time to fold. Understand?"

"Oh, I understand exactly...I understand that the great galactic big game hunter, Kaori Batta, is nothing but a great big coward." Ghecharo extended his gloved hand. "Kleck, hand me my weapon."

Obediently, Kleck removed the heavy sporting blaster from his backpack and handed it to the nobleman.

Ghecharo raised the weapon. "No animal in the galaxy can outsmart me."

Kleck grinned widely at his master's bravado.

"Come, Kleck...Today we claim a new trophy for my wall."



Kleck's smile abruptly vanished.

Ghecharo stalked down towards his target. "On to victory."

Reluctantly, Kleck hefted his burden, stumbling after the nobleman.

Batta watched the display in silence, deciding that Ghecharo's military career must have been honorary in nature.

The hunter shrugged, unbuckled his own satchel, and let it slip to the ground. He unslung the Predator from his back. The huge hunting blaster felt reassuring in his hands.

As Ghecharo and Kleck reached the mouth of the cave, Batta began to field-strip his weapon. The hunter paused only to see if the Imperials were going to be stupid enough to activate a light source before entering the darkened cavern.

Kleck pulled a lumalamp from his immense pack, holding it up like a signal beacon.

Batta allowed himself a single, long-suffering sigh as he calmly proceeded down the mountainside, putting his rifle back together as he went.

The two men disappeared inside the cave, and at the same moment, the wind died down, as if trying to hear what would happen next.

Batta had fully reassembled the Predator and was closing in on the mouth of the cave when the first shrill screams echoed from inside. The shrieks were accompanied by horrible sounds of tearing, wrenching, and wet things impacting on the ground.

The hunter removed a fresh power pack from a pocket on his temperature-controlled body glove. The thick, black material was similar to what stormtroopers wore under their armor.

He had just slapped the pack into the handle of his rifle when he heard the sound of someone running through the cave and gasping for air. It was quickly followed by a bone-chilling roar of fury.

Batta calmly held the Predator in his hands, hefting its familiar weight.

Seconds later, Kleck burst out of the cave, as pale as the icy tundra surrounding him. All that remained of the large backpack were the shoulder-straps and a ragged piece of cloth. His eyes were glazed as he ran past Batta and crashed into the snow, utterly out of breath. Unable to move, Kleck covered his eyes and

started whimpering. "It's coming!"

Batta swung the rifle up to his shoulder and dropped to one knee. The hunter took a long, deep breath and ceased all movement. A casual observer would think he had been carved out of ice.

At that moment, the modrol emerged. Easily five meters tall, the creature's white fur was marked with fresh claw wounds—the creature must have recently had a dispute with another of its kind. Bellowing in rage, the beast locked onto Batta and charged, baring its fangs as it reached out with razor-like claws.

The modrol closed to five meters....

Batta didn't flinch, his only movement to elevate the tip of the rifle.

Four meters....

"Shoot it!" screamed Kleck.

Three meters....

The hunter's right eye snapped shut, his left eye focusing on the charging target with machine-like precision. His finger curled itself around the trigger.

Two....

Batta's nose wrinkled at the fetid smell of the creature's breath.

One....

The predator roared to life, the blast echoing through the entire valley.

The modrol took one more step, then fell, landing at Batta's feet.

And everything was silent.

Batta stood up and shouldered the big rifle.

Kleck was still flat on his stomach in the snow. He stared up in complete awe as the hunter walked past him. "That was incredible!"

"No, that was just my job" Batta started up the snowy ridge. "I hope you learned something from this little excursion, Mr. Kleck. Out here in the wild, there's a real thin line between hunter and beastie chow."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

If you haven't noticed by now (and if not, maybe it's time you considered one of them cyborg brain boxes that boost the wattage upstairs), Exovar loves droids. He loves building them, and he loves fixing them.

I mean, they make up 99% of his staff. See, during Exie's exploring days out in Wild Space, that's all he had to count on. Unlike people, his mechanical chums never let him down. He never forgot that. That's why Exovar welcomes droids of every make and model. Sometimes Exie even treats them better than the real live customers. You'll even see him sit down and have a drink with them. (I dunno what they drink...motivator fluid, maybe?)

Now, I've been around awhile and I've seen some strange things in my time, but I figured the odds of me getting chummy with a droid were about the same as a Jawa giving me a fair shake on an ore processing unit.

Then I meet Botax, one of Exie's two peacekeeper droids. Turns out they used to be assassin-types until Exovar personally customized them. Now, he and Entax make sure things stay pleasant around the Emporium.

Well, before I knew it, me and Bot were getting along like old friends. Lemme tell you, that changed my anti-droid attitude pretty quick. Now, when I see some slagchucker mistreating his R2 unit, I spend a coupla' minutes educating the sap. Droids are really just like you and me. A bit shinier, maybe, but you get the idea.

Lately, I even stop by Exovar's to see how the big bucket o' bolts is doing. Hmmm. If I don't get out of this blasted place soon, I might even start to like the little lizard....

The Broken Tusk

"In my opinion, the Broken Tusk is the sole reason the word vile was invented. Pay attention, gentlebeings. This is not the place to take the family. If, for some unknown reason, you do manage to find yourself at the Tusk's dirty doorstep, here's some advice. Secure your credit chits, keep your blaster within easy reach, hope the Force is with you, and don't even think about setting a limb in the Tusk's 'Dool Arena,' unless you don't mind parting with it. If you've ever used the word 'squeamish' to describe yourself, stay away from the Tusk...."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL .. K'REYE, COHDEN

No one seems exactly sure when the Tusk sprung up, but its legend was born soon after it was built. Now, like most turbolaser-sized tales, this one has changed a few times in the telling. Consider yourself warned...

As the story goes, many years ago, two Gamorrean brothers by the name of Gorge and Greel were slaves of Var'Rotha Fin'Rotha, a particularly nasty Tolanese bounty hunter. Things looked bleak indeed for our heroes, who were bound and constrained most of the time, until the hunter needed some physical labor performed.

Fin'Rotha had just dropped off a bounty at Coruscant, and was en route to the Outer Rim. He was anxious to spend some of his newly earned fortune on illegal modifications to his ship, Tolan's Tusk. The thorn-shaped craft was the bounty hunter's pride and joy.

The brothers, unusually bright specimens for their species, concocted a plan of escape during their long journey from the Core Worlds. Fin'Rotha decided to make the best of the time and let Greel (being the smaller and more docile of the brothers) out of his cage to clean the ship's interior. As the bounty hunter caught up on the latest holovids, Greel (also the mechanically-minded one) busted the ship's hyperdrive, forcing the Tusk into regular space.

As expected, the Tolanese hunter quickly shoved the supposedly hapless Gamorrean away from the

delicate machinery to see what had gone wrong. In the confusion, Greel freed his brother from captivity. Gorge (the mangling-minded one) politely offered their former master a choice between two methods of egress...escape pod or airlock.

Fin'Rotha took the former and was never heard from again. As for the brothers, well, they were overjoyed. They had a space-faring ship to call their own and were free to travel anywhere in the galaxy. That is, until the ship exhausted its supply of fuel cells and crash-landed on Reuss VIII. (Remember, I said they were unusually bright, for Gamorreans...but they weren't geniuses.)

Upon impact, Tolan's Tusk broke into two halves. The needle-like nose of the craft disintegrated. The thick rear section of the ship remained intact, however, and neatly impaled itself right through the heart of an abandoned factory complex, its stern defiantly facing skyward.

After stumbling from the wreckage, Greel took one look at the result and was struck with an idea. (Hey, the Force works in mysterious ways.) He envisioned setting up shop inside the husk of the craft, and opening that little cantina he and Gorge had always dreamed about owning.

When his brother finally emerged, Greel quickly explained his idea. Gorge grinned excitedly, baring the shattered remains of his right front tusk. Greel took one look at his brother's mouth, then gazed back at the ship and rechristened it... Greel's Good Place to Have Drink and Eat and then Get Into Fights.

But Gorge got lost somewhere between "drink" and "fights," so Greel settled on The Broken Tusk instead.

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

I know what you're thinking right now....

Why would I possibly want to visit this place?

Well, let's face it...Nobody comes to the Tusk thinking it's a classy five super-nova eatery with fine-dining ambiance and some Kubaz chef in a big puffy hat serving up Jawa-sized portions of experimental cuisine.

The food is lousy, the drinks are worse. (Watered down isn't even the word for it. "Flooded" is more appropriate.) The waiters are rude and are just as likely to spit in your eye as your Frampemmi soup if you tick them off.

Then again, the whole reason most people set foot in this dungeon is for their twisted idea of entertainment, so they don't much care about anything else except getting their money's worth watching a couple of good brawls.

And believe me, as far as that goes, the Tusk does not disappoint.

Now, I know there are some of you out there who crave excitement... You want to be living the adventure, instead of sitting back and watching somebody else have all the fun. Then the Tusk is the perfect place to visit because you can always step into the ring and prove whether you're a contender or a pretender. You've always said you were tough, so go ahead and wager a few hard-earned credits on your battle.

Think your pals will bet on you with the odds you're gonna get against somebody like Zomil?

Right. Guess again, farmboy.

And In This Corner...

Norrin Vaxx stepped into the spot-lumas, narrowing his eyes to protect them from the blinding lights. As Greel enthusiastically announced the Jedi's name, the crowd exploded into hearty cheers. The applause was loud, but he'd certainly heard louder.

Vaxx swept an errant lock of silver hair from his eyes and wondered who his opponent would be this night. Lately, Greel had refused to announce the evening's prime match-ups in hopes of attracting more customers. The air of mystery was apparently working—the Tusk was filled beyond capacity. Vaxx had to give the porcine blood-sucker credit: he knew how to put on a show.

With a chuckle lost in the sea of background noise, Vaxx extended both arms over his head, displaying the familiar silvery handle. The shining yellow blade of energy erupted with a distinctive *snap-hiss* that silenced the entire building. The thrumming vibrations always relaxed him for the fight. He swung the blade down through a series of arcing cuts, then returned to a ready position. Bowing low at the waist to thundering applause, he presented the lightsaber as if for a military inspection, then awaited his opponent.

The blast door across the way slid open and spot-lumas immediately left Vaxx in the darkness as they swung over to shine on the entry arch. The Tusk was silent once more as Greel's mechanical voice echoed across the Arena.

"And now, the Broken Tusk is proud to present the first top 10 ranked bout of our newest and



most exciting challenger to grace the Arena in a long time...."

Thanks a lot, Vaxx thought.

"Ladies and gentlebeings, a new and very mysterious favorite. The one, the only, the spectacular...Brin T'shkali!"

The resulting roar of the crowd was deafening and this time punctuated by squeals from the ever-growing contingent of female spectators.

Vaxx shook his head. *No respect at all tonight.*

The Jedi had heard all about this new contender, and claimed to be singularly unimpressed by the growing mystique. Yet like everyone else in the Tusk, he found himself staring at the dark doorway, awaiting Brin's entrance.

A sudden burst of white exploded from the shadows, spinning out and up into the air, nearly three meters off the floor of the arena. The pale ball remained suspended like a child's orbit ball in the air for what seemed like an eternity, then unraveled into the long, sleek form of the warrior.

Brin landed gracefully in front of the Jedi and suddenly, Vaxx couldn't hear himself think over the din of the exulting crowd.

Vaxx stared at his taller opponent, who returned the gaze evenly, those electric blue eyes unblinking. The Jedi felt a sudden tingling in the Force and he found himself a bit concerned.

Brin exploded into a frenzy of activity, startling Vaxx, who uncon-

sciously took a step back. The Nagai slipped two strange-looking knives from the holsters strapped to his forearms. Each weapon had a serrated blade, a handle with a large hole in the center and then a matching blade emerging from the other end. Brin slid his long forefingers into the holes, spinning the blades around like propellers from archaic heli-vehicles.

It was an impressive display as he twisted his arms around and around in dizzying fashion, the twin blades performing their mesmerizing spin-dance the entire time.

Finally, all of Brin's movement ceased, and except for the circling blades, the Nagai was as still as a statue. And he was staring back at Vaxx with a challenging gaze.

After the resulting applause and cheers had finally died down, Brin cocked his head slightly. "Do you wish to surrender, old one?"

The Jedi was struck speechless, and for a moment he thought he had another ego-void like Tull Raine on his hands. Then, Vaxx saw the small grin tickling the corners of the Nagai's delicate mouth.

Vaxx swung his lightsaber forward into a ready position and laughed. "I hope the Force really is with you, punk. 'Cause you're gonna need all the help you can get...."



ADDENDUM/PERSONAL .. K'REYE, COHDEN

All things considered, the Tusk is a surprisingly safe place to visit. (Unless you step into the Dool Arena, of course.) Gorge makes for a very effective deterrent, and in a pinch the Tusk's contenders can quickly become its defenders. There aren't many civilians who would want to go (or could survive) a few rounds with Tull Raine.

If that wasn't reason enough to avoid being an annoyance, there are rumors that crime lord Torel Vorne is an investor in the Tusk. No one in his right mind would want to cross Vorne, at least not if they enjoy breathing. (And compared to the alternative, even the toxic air of Reuss VIII seems nice...)

Fathoms

"This completely self-contained, submerged aquatic entertainment complex is one of the strangest places you'll ever visit, but it's worth a look even for the most hardened landlubbers. Huge transparisteel viewports display the breathtaking vistas of underwater life on the planet Calamari. Lots of folks find it quite relaxing to watch the sea life swim idly by. The accommodations are plush and the food is exquisite, not to mention extremely fresh. Fathoms' motto is 'Come drown your sorrows,' but don't fear. No one's taken the 'final plunge' there. Not yet...."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL .. K'REYE, COHDEN

Y'know, I find it remarkable that somebody as reportedly all-knowing and intelligent as the Emperor still hasn't learned a simple lesson...Push somebody hard enough, and no matter how peaceful they are, they will ultimately fight back.

Take the most domesticated nerf you can find—if you cause it enough grief and suffering, you can bet your last credit the beastie will turn around and take a big hunk from the seat of your pants. And deservedly so.

Well, that's exactly what happened on Calamari, and a thousand other worlds that found themselves on the wrong end of an Imperial turbolaser battery. It's the whole reason the Rebellion exists.

I guess you could say the Alliance is a bunch of irate nerfs who got kicked in the teeth one too many times. Well, you could. ...But I wouldn't suggest it. At least, not if you prefer the seat of your pants to remain attached.



ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

When bragging about his HyperDive, Chasdy likes to say, "We're the only dive-in cantina in the galaxy."

Well, ever wonder why that is?

Let me paint a holo-pic for ya....

Imagine your typical community pool, full of beings you don't know, splashing and cavorting and doing the Force knows what else in the water. Got it? Okay, now imagine what those beings secrete, ooze, or otherwise sweat out of their respective bodies. Water seems a little different now, doesn't it?

Now personally, I think that explains why the man's never around. Okay, okay, I know there are purifier filters present, but still...I'll be over in another bar where the only liquid around is in the glass.



Business Lunch...

"Nice try, Odanni," Geffa said between steaming mouthfuls of fried khasva-fish. "But you aren't getting the merchandise, no matter how well you feed me." He paused long enough to take a breath and gesture at the plate. "Although, I have to say, this is spectacular."

Odanni stared at the Rodian, her large eyes narrow and focused. Her bowl of seaspice soup sat untouched. "You don't have to tell me how good the food is, Geffa. I own the place, remember?"

Geffa speared another chunk of khasva and grinned. "A misguided attempt at legitimate business. I'm surprised Fathoms is still in business considering how little you know about honesty."

Odanni wasn't about to let him needle her. She smiled gracefully, and said, "I'm not the one trying to alter the deal at the last microsecond."

"Nonsense. I'm just adding a, shall we say, 'slight emergency mark-up.' These things happen."

"'Small' isn't what I'd call a 10 percent increase in your cut. The words I'd use to describe the situation aren't particularly fit for a family restaurant."

"I know you don't like it, Odanni. But it's not like you have a choice in the matter." Geffa leered around a mouthful of fish. "You know I'm the only spice dealer big enough to fill your order."

"So that's it? I pay your ridiculous mark-up or you cut me off?"

"I guess they're right. You *are* a bright girl."

Odanni held up a small vial filled with blue liquid. "Pity," she said, spilling its contents onto the floor.

Geffa's interest was piqued. "What was that?"

"Nothing, really. Just the antidote to the poisoned food you just shoveled down your double-crossing gullet."

The Rodian seemed to grow even greener. His fork tumbled from his fingers as he stared down at his food. "You're lying!"

"I guess they're right. You *are* an idiot." She abruptly stood. "I'd like to say it's been nice doing business with you. But it really hasn't."

Geffa tried to stand, reaching for his blaster.

He accomplished neither.

Suddenly, his body went rigid. A pitiful gurgling sound escaped his throat, and his body slowly slumped forward into the plate of food.

Odanni spun around, walking towards the door. Nollo Kanx stood in the shadows of the entranceway, leaning against the wall. She passed him with a quick nod. As Kanx turned to follow, he muttered, "Must have been something he ate."

Bantha Traxx

"This desert motif club is a real hot spot. The place is always jumping like a gundark on a thermal vent. The drink of choice is the Tatooine Sunburn. The house band is BoSS Code, though other star-spanning groups regularly play here, including Proton Overload and Dengar and the Destroyers. If you want to save some credits, the same effect can be attained by driving a vibro-ax through your skull. One word of caution, though: Making fun of the dancing, neon bantha on the holo-sign is grounds for immediate removal.



ADDENDUM/PERSONAL .. K'REYE, COHDEN

Yin Vocta.

Let's see... How could I possibly describe him? The only word that immediately springs to mind is "unique."

I've met the Anomid a few times in the course of my travels and though it's difficult for me to admit—considering some of the dark deeds he deals in—I actually like the guy.

It's hard to explain unless you've met him, but I'll do my best.

First of all, he's mysterious without being intimidating. (Unless of course, he's accompanied by his goons, Tice and R'Kayza.) Vocta is polite, charming, and downright funny. He has a talent for making people feel completely at ease—to the point where you can find yourself letting down your guard without even realizing it. The crime lord seems to know exactly what to say, whether he's trying to defuse a potentially dangerous situation, make a point crystal clear, or just get a laugh out of someone.

I'm still not sure how someone who orders a being's death without blinking an eye can just as easily deliver a side-splitting impression of Jabba the Hutt, but Vocta is



Valuable Commodities

Divv cast a nervous glance into the dark alcove. The flickering pulses of a dozen tiny lights betrayed the presence of one of Vocta's two premiere bodyguards. So much of Haelon Tice was cybernetic that the man gave off a distinct energy signature. The assassin thrummed like any other machine.

And if Tice was present, then R'Kayza could not be too far away. Just the thought of the Gand Findsman peering at him from the shadows sent a chill down

Divv's spine. He swallowed audibly and tried to focus on the being behind the elegant black marble desk.

Unfortunately, the sight of Yin Vocta wasn't particularly reassuring. The Anomid crime lord was cloaked in the dark robes favored by his species. The robe's voluminous hood kept Vocta's face concealed, though his large silver eyes seemed to glow in the dim lumalight.

"You have the information I require?" Vocta's voice was surprisingly soft and fluid considering it was synthesized mechanically through a vocalizer mask.

"Of course, Lord Vocta."

The Anomid held up a six-fingered hand, encased in a supple leather glove. "Please, Divv...No formalities. Myself-image is not so sickly that I need support it with pretentious ceremonial titles."

Divv nodded quickly.

"Speaking of which, how is Jabba doing, anyway?" Vocta began to chuckle. "The Great Bloated One, Terror of Tatooine...May he fall victim to an exotic and excruciatingly painful ailment." The Anomid paused, adding in a hopeful tone, "He hasn't, has he?"

"No," Divv managed through pursed lips. "But in an odd coincidence, one of his food tasters has recently contracted something similar to what you've just described. Jabba, however, is doing quite well."

Vocta snorted dismissively. "The dark side take him and his ugly, little monkey-lizard." He extended a gloved hand. "But until that day, I suppose that I'll just have to be satisfied with inflicting minor wounds upon his person."

Divv smiled, removing a datacard from his pocket and handing it over. "The name of every one of his spies on Lianna. As promised."

Vocta casually handed the card over his shoulder. "Kill them all for me, won't you?"

Divv swore he saw nothing move, but suddenly the datacard vanished into the shadows. *R'Kayza*, he thought and the feeling of anxiety returned for a moment. As the two killers exited the room to carry out their master's bidding, Divv regained his composure.

"You certainly don't waste time..." Divv said with a nervous laugh.

"Squandering valuable commodities isn't good for business," Vocta said, then added with a wink, "Unless of course, they belong to someone else."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

Some think she's a Jedi, others think she's a Rebel or Imperial spy. She claims to be just a bartender. The only known fact is that she keeps everyone guessing.

I can attest that Sha'Dria has taken an abnormal, and some would argue dangerous, interest in Yin Vocta and his illegal operations.

For his part, the Anomid has intimated that he knows more about his bartender than she thinks. Whether that's true or not, it's still quite obvious that Sha'Dria has piqued Vocta's curiosity. How things will play out remains to be seen.

The Pits

"The Pits is aptly named. Not only is it a swoop racer bar, but it's dirty, dark, and sunk into the ground. If you can't tell a landspeeder from a Star Destroyer, this isn't your kind of place. The crowd is obnoxious, dangerous, and fearless. While most disagreements are settled on the Pits' race course, fights do have a tendency to flare up with a startling fury. Minor arguments can quickly escalate into massive brawls, especially between rival gangs. If you don't believe me, just take a quick count of all the blast marks in the wall!"

**ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..
K'REYE, COHDEN**

I've only seen Blizz Pinnix and his remarkable Raptor in action once. And let me tell you, I don't think my stomach has ever fully recovered. What Blizz can do on that speeder bike is so utterly amazing that words cannot do it justice. If the

Force isn't with Pinnix, then something else surely is. Whether it's fate, luck, or just unbelievable talent is for others to debate.

The Raptor is the fastest thing I've seen without sublight engines, and Pinnix pushes that bike to its limits. Try and understand. As I heard it, during the trial runs of the Raptor, Ika-Adno could not keep a pilot on the thing for more than 20 seconds; most lasted less than three or four. Nine out of 10 racers blacked out before the bike even reached 40% of its performance capabilities.

It boggles the brain box, y'know?

That is one scary bike. It's not just the fancy paint, either. Opponents

have said there's something eerie about the Raptor's blazing eye. Some whisper that the bike is actually sentient. Others say Blizz has a borg implant and is linked to the bike. Some even say the Raptor holds the spirit of a dead dark Jedi. Whatever the case, the unavoidable truth is that Raptor rules the repulsor lanes.

Now, there are always nay-sayers and disbelievers out there, and I was one of them until I saw the truth with my own peepers. I'm a believer now.

Let me give some free advice to all you swoopers and racers out there who think you might be good enough to race the master on his machine.

Just hand over the credits you were thinking about betting and walk away. Save yourself the embarrassment. Blizz has never been beaten on the Black Raptor. And in my humble opinion, he never will. In fact, the only way I'd think anyone would have the remotest chance of victory would be if ol' Blizz passed out cold, and you know what?

I'd still bet on Raptor.

Glow Dome

"Boasting over a million separate lights, glowing drinks, illuminated dancers, and mood-altering SenseLights, the dome is just what it promises to be—'The Bright Center to the Galaxy.' Automatic polarized lenses are a must for any alien with visual receptors. Oh, and don't worry about finding the place. You can see it five kilometers away.

"Anything inside the Dome could be holographic (and often is). One of the few 'realities' is its lovely co-owner, Corinna A'Daasha. She's got a wicked sense of humor, though, so be careful. The last guy that got Corinna upset left with a beautiful near-human that turned out to be a Gamorrean when they stepped outside. Of course, the last guy that upset her partner and twin sister Kandria was never heard from again...."

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

Absolutely nothing is what it seems.

That's the one thing you better keep in mind at all times while inside Glow Dome. Take my advice and be very careful what you say, what you do, and who you talk to. The place may be pretty blasted bright, but that just makes the shadows run deep.

Corinna herself, while a bit of a troublemaker, is mostly harmless. Her twin sister, Kandria, on the other hand...she's one to be careful around. That girl has a bit of the dark side pulsing through that beautiful body.

Now, I'm not really sure what game Urtell's playing, but you can be sure that with all the holographic power at his fingertips, the doc's starting to think of himself as some kinda deity by now. The power of creation, even if its limited to creating illusion, is tempting...too tempting for some people.

And at the Dome, giving in to it could cost you more than you're willing to spend....

The Falling Star Saloon

"The Falling Star Saloon is located on Gateway Space Station, which orbits the lifeless planetoid of Tshindral III. In its glory days, the station served as a bustling Imperial Transfer Post—a 'gateway' to the Outer Rim and beyond.

"After the Imperials withdrew and abandoned the station, Gateway became a haven for aliens, smugglers, privateers, pirates, and other castoffs of the 'perfect' Imperial society. In recent years, under the direction of slick businessman Talandro Starlyte (who rents the station from the Empire), Gateway has evolved into Starlyte Station—a profitable free-trading post. At the heart of the station is The Falling Star Saloon, where beings from every species imaginable can escape from the bustle for a few hours. But don't get the wrong idea. It's still business before pleasure...And as Talandro always says, 'He who hesitates, disintegrates.'"

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

Talandro Starlyte...Let's see. How about a sithspawn in nerfherder's clothing?

What? You think my viewport's a built tilted just 'cause he's a Coruscantly-brained resident and I'm a native of grand ol' Corellia? Okay, that might be a possibility.

But, the rumors persist about Talandro's dirty dealings. As my dear old ma's recipe for a rumor was always "a lot of lie and a dash of truth," draw your own conclusions.

Now, when I mention Talandro's shady business, I'm not just talking about that black market stuff. Everybody knows how the man turns a credit. I'm referring to all those beings that disappear in the corridors of Starlyte Station. See, a lot of bodies pass through that orbiting garbage scow and a surprisingly high percentage of them are never heard from again. Not that you'll ever hear him speak about those numbers. And it's a sure bet that his Imperial lapdogs ain't gonna lose out on their bonuses by blabbing, either.

Well, I have it on relatively reliable authority that the body count (actually, lack thereof) is unnaturally high, and when that many beings vanish into thin atmosphere, you can bet the Force that something nasty is going on. And more often than not, the "s" word is going to be dropped.

That's "s" as in "slavery."

What makes me so suspicious? Well, in the little bitty print on the form that all visitors sign upon docking at the station, there's a sub-sub-clause stating that after a one month period without payment, the ships and all possessions therewith become property of Talandro Starlyte.

Hmmm. This reminds me of something...What's the word for it? Oh, yeah. I remember....

SCAM.

ADDENDUM/PERSONAL ..

K'REYE, COHDEN

So, now you've gotten the grand tour and I'm sure you've found a place or two that's just your style. Remember, when you show up to tell 'em that I sent you.

Once you all make this little travelogue of mine a big success, I'm sure they'll be lots of copycat guides spouting the same cliches, covering the same two or three boring spots. When you see that other guide that bears more than a passing resemblance to this little tome of wisdom, before you give away your hard-earned credits, I gotta ask, "Who are you gonna trust?"

Some busy-body know it all social scientest who wouldn't know a good time if it came up and bought him a drink —

—or ME!

I thought so. See you next time, folks. And if you see me in just such a place during one of your journeys, be a friend and buy me a cold one!

Battle For The Golden Sun

A navigational accident has led the Empire to the mysterious and legendary water world, Sedri. Recent communiques, intercepted by the Alliance spy network, hint at increased Imperial activity on this unexplored planet. There have also been reports of a potential weapon source, something referred to as "Golden Sun." The reports, if they can be believed, claim that with this unknown weapon the Empire can quickly and utterly destroy the Rebellion.

When Alliance dignitary Mors Odrion heard these rumors, he took it upon himself to investigate Sedri. He never returned. His aide, the Mon Calamari named Rekara, did find her way back to a base — but whatever befell the two has driven Rekara insane.

Now Rekara, muttering on about "Golden Sun," accompanies a team of Rebel agents to the mysterious water planet. They must recover the missing dignitary and discover the secret of this new "weapon" before the Empire has a chance to use it against the Alliance. This group could be all that stands between the Empire and total control of the Galaxy. . .

Cut-Away to Imperial Aquatic Garrison

Read aloud:

EXTERIOR: SEDRI, IMPERIAL AQUATIC GARRISON. *The base, gleaming white in the sun, rises like an iceberg from a serene ocean. The camera moves closer to the base at high speed, passing through an opening blast door to reveal. . .*

INTERIOR: GARRISON BASE. *Everything is very new. The camera moves down sparsely populated corridors, past two Droids and a technician working at an open access panel. Up a turbolift, then a door marked "Commander Aban" comes into view. Closer, and the door opens.*

"Report, lieutenant!" *snaps Aban.*

"We've sent out patrols to search the native villages, sir," *the unseen lieutenant replies.* "Stories abound, but nothing solid yet."

"And the Swimmer?" *Aban's eyes gleam.*

"It arrived with the last shipment, sir."

"Perfect." *Aban stands triumphantly.* "If you do not find this Golden Sun by the time the Swimmer is operational, we will raze the Sedrian villages one at a time until they give it to us! You have your orders."

Fade to. . .

INTERIOR: REBEL SPACE BOAT *EXPLORER.*

Cut-Away to Mors Odrion

Before this episode ends, read aloud:

INTERIOR: MORS ODRION'S CELL. *It is very dark — only a small beam of light illuminates the form of Mors Odrion, Alliance dignitary. He looks haggard and weak as he stares at the floor. "Rekara," he mutters, "I'm so sorry."*

The sound of his cell door being unlocked brings Odrion out of his reverie — his head snaps up and his eyes squint at the brighter light. "What now?" he asks his captor.

"Time for you to prove your value to the Empire," *says a deep, rumbling voice. There is a clicking sound and Odrion's eyes widen in fear.*

Fade to black. . .

1st Rebel: There I was, minding my own business on guard duty, when this ship comes to a screeching halt in front of Delta Base. And guess who stumbles out of it?

2nd Rebel: You told us this story! It was that Mon Calamarian over there, the one clutching the hunk of rock. Rekara.

GM (as Rekara): I am Rekara, listener to sorrow.

3rd Rebel: She still isn't making much sense, poor girl. Goes on lots of missions with the Alliance dignitary named Mors Odrion, then one day their ship is lost. Next thing we know she shows up at Delta Base half crazy and with no idea what happened.

GM (as Rekara): Odrion? Poor Odrion. On Sedri, strange Sedri. We must rescue him! We must stop the crying!

4th Rebel: She did tell the base commanders something about Golden Sun.

5th Rebel: Isn't that the new weapon mentioned in the Imperial communiques we intercepted?

6th Rebel: You got it. Which means there'll probably be Imperials crawling all over this planet.

GM (as Rekara): Swimming. Not crawling. Sedri is all oceans — no land at all. The sea cries at night when the water turns gold.

4th Rebel: There she goes again! Are we sure it's safe to have her along?

3rd Rebel: High Command said she'd be very valuable to us, and to give her time. They think she's recovering slowly from whatever drove her nuts in the first place.

2nd Rebel: I just wish I knew what she was talking about.

6th Rebel: I've punched the coordinates we took from Rekara's ship into our nav computer, but there's got to be something wrong. These readings say we're jumping into the middle of a sun. The hyperdrive inhibitor is going to boot the program any second now. . .

1st Rebel: Somehow I doubt that this is what High Command meant when they said to be on the lookout for "Golden Sun." I really don't think they want us to plunge into one! Say, why didn't the program crash?

GM (as Rekara): No boot, no crash! I fixed it! See, here is the inhibitor module! No more nasty cut-off functions!

5th Rebel: That's it! This crazy Mon Cal is going to kill us! Can anybody fix the inhibitor before we come out of hyperspace?

2nd Rebel: Too late. We're already slowing back into realspace. According to those readings, we should come out in orbit around one mighty powerful sun.

3rd Rebel: We'll be so close we won't even feel the heat when the hull melts.

1st Rebel: Why'd I have to be the one on duty when her ship came in? Can anyone tell me that. . . ?

GM: Before anyone can answer, space shifts and your ship emerges from hyperspace. If the nav computer is right, you are all about to die. . .

Cut-Away to Karak and Aban

Read aloud:

INTERIOR: IMPERIAL BASE, COMMANDER ABAN'S QUARTERS. *Aban and a large, fierce-looking Sedrian listen to a breathless messenger.*

"The swimmer is loaded and ready, sir. Your orders?"

"Well, Karak?" *Aban looks to the Sedrian.* "Will you fulfill your bargain and lead us to the Fitsay sun caves?"

Karak nods his assent, his eyes gleaming evilly. "And then I will turn over the Rebel, as we agreed. And then you will give me half the Golden Sun and enough of your weapons for all my soldiers."

Commander Aban nods and turns back to the messenger. "Order the attack to begin at once!" *he says.*

Fade to. . .

The Abduction Of Crying Dawn Singer

Cut-Away to Capital City, Rayter Sector

Read aloud:

WIPE TO: *A star filled night sky.*

PAN DOWN: *From the sky to the Sector Performing Arts Center. The SecPAC is a large structure, richly designed in the Old Republic Baroque style, and built of the finest natural stones available in the sector.*

An albino Wookiee, smoking a long clay pipe, and wearing loose black pants and a red vest, paces the length of the steps of a private entrance at the rear of the building. He nervously checks the chrono ring on his thumb.

CUT TO: *A close-up of a man's face in the shadows. His left cheek is marked by nine precisely cut parallel scars.*

PULL OUT: *The scarred man is standing in a crevice in the wall of the SecPAC. A younger man, his cheek similarly marked, stands with him. In the background, the Wookiee continues to pace.*

An ornately decorated repulsorlift limousine pulls up to the base of the steps. Two lightly armed guards exit the limousine. They scan the area quickly and cheerfully greet the Wookiee. An extremely obese human exits, followed by two Ithorians.

There is a short pause and a silver and red humanoid Droid steps through. The Droid holds the door open, and a slightly built avian creature steps out.

The Wookiee nervously takes a last puff from his pipe, then lets it fall to the ground and shatter.

The scarred man in the shadows switches on the comlink clipped to his collar and speaks.

"Okay boys, let's do it."

The scarred man steps into the light, and, with two shots from his gold-plated blaster, kills the guards. A dozen other men appear from the shadows.

Fade to black.

The face is that of Zeke Rondel, commander of this base. He has thick, curly black hair. The expression on his face in the hologram indicates that he isn't merely wishing you well on your leave. After a few seconds, he begins to

speak in deep, measured tones.

"I understand that you were promised some rest and recreation time while you were here on the *Donn*, but we have just received a top priority assignment for you.

"As you know, we have recently begun employing Shashay Space Singers as astrogators on many of our couriers, reconnaissance craft, and freighters. Their skills have greatly enhanced our efficiency.

"In addition to our use of the Space Singers, we are currently negotiating with the Shashay regarding the establishment of a base on their homeworld. Due to the extreme security measures taken by the Shashay to conceal the coordinates of their world, we believe that this base would be totally secure. It is important that our negotiations are not compromised in any way. We desperately need this base.

"However, an unforeseen difficulty has arisen, and the Nestmothers of the Shashay have asked for our assistance.

"One of their cultural heroes, a performer named Crying Dawn Singer, has been kidnapped. We have been asked to rescue him.

"We have reason to believe that these kidnappers are not simply criminals, but are, in fact, Imperial operatives. Through a special arrangement, we were allowed to place a field agent into the entourage of Crying Dawn Singer—someone who could travel the galaxy quickly and freely. Although we are sure that our agent has not been identified, we believe that his proximity to Crying Dawn Singer has been deduced.

"Our only clue to the location of Crying Dawn Singer is that our agent was outfitted with a homing transponder. The Force has been with us, for despite the statistical improbability of such a discovery, one of our probe Droids

received signals from that particular transponder while orbiting the planet Najarka.

"To help you identify the agent, there are established code phrases. If you say, 'Wheels go round and round,' the appropriate response is 'Gears without a sound.' This agent is also important to our cause, for Alliance Intell has informed us that he is aware of the location of this base. If he breaks under Imperial interrogation, this base will be lost."

"Your orders are to leave immediately for Najarka, find our operative, assuming he is still alive and present, and rescue Crying Dawn Singer. Even if the agent is dead, it may be possible to deduce what has happened to Crying Dawn Singer. Crying Dawn Singer must be returned to the Shashay alive and unharmed.

"This data plaque contains a hologram of Crying Dawn Singer and his entourage.

"Until you complete your mission, Captain Kollene and his ship are at your disposal.

"May the Force be with you."

Gamemaster (as Maytoc Kollene, captain of the spacetug *Worthless Fool*): *We're approaching the daylight side of the planet. Watch for starrise.*

1st Rebel: We're out of the shadow. Scanning for other ships.

GM: *The planet's surface spreads out beneath you. Directly below is a narrow band of dark green vegetation. To either side of the vegetation are unending glaciers extending to the horizon ...*

2nd Rebel: You know, I heard something about Najarka once. I wish I could remember what it was.

3rd Rebel: Be quiet and keep an eye on the power consumption.

GM (as Maytoc): *Dropping down into the atmosphere.*

4th Rebel: The sensors are picking up a large concentration of metal.

5th Rebel: I've got that, too. The duracomp scan says that there's non-natural alloys present.

1st Rebel: Move in closer.

Maytoc: *Right.*

GM: *The ship swings into the atmosphere.*

4th Rebel: I'm getting more definition. It's — it's an Imperial base!

6th Rebel: What!

3rd Rebel: Are you sure?

4th Rebel: Yeah, nothing else has that stupid honeycomb shape.

1st Rebel: Full-sphere scan. Everybody

get to a gun. Maytoc, prepare to —

5th Rebel: Wait — the radiation signature's way too small. It's not using any power.

6th Rebel: There's no transmissions coming from it either; no activity at all.

2nd Rebel: I remember now. A pirate in a bar told me that there was an Imperial base on Najarka.

3rd Rebel: Tell us something we don't already know.

2nd Rebel: Well ... they abandoned it.

6th Rebel: They did? Why?

2nd Rebel: It was too dangerous.

6th Rebel: How did the pirate know this?

2nd Rebel: He wanted to use the place as a secret base.

6th Rebel: Did he?

2nd Rebel: Don't know. Nobody ever heard from him after that.

5th Rebel: Whew. Do we really want to land?

4th Rebel: He's right. If something scared away an entire base ...

GM: *The homing transceiver, set on maximum range, begins to beep.*

5th Rebel: The transponder is still on the planet. The Rebel agent could still be here.

1st Rebel: What's the location?

5th Rebel: Straight ahead. Near the abandoned base.

1st Rebel: We're going in.

3rd Rebel: Great. Into the jaws of death to rescue someone we can't even recognize.

The First Transmission

Read aloud:

The hologram begins with a close-up of the face of a human male. His skin is very pale. His chin is pointed and thrust out. His left cheek is marked by nine precisely cut parallel scars. His narrow eyes are close set and dark. He smiles a crooked smile, then speaks.

"This is Yearo Seville, leader of the Rebel Alliance in Rayter Sector; I've got a message for the Shashay."

The holo pulls out, revealing Seville's elegantly tailored clothing, his richly carved walking stick, and his gold-plated BlasTech blaster, which is pointed at Crying Dawn Singer. Crying Dawn Singer is being held by two other pale-skinned, richly dressed and heavily armed humans, both with cheeks scarred like Seville's. The floor and the walls behind them are covered with pelts of the rarest galactic species, many of them sentient.

"That's right, we've got him, and if you want him back, you've got to pay our price."

Cut to a close-up of Seville, who has stopped smiling.

"The Rebellion is grossly undermanned and underfunded. If we don't get help soon, we're going under. Our soldiers are deserting and joining the Imperial Army and Navy. Our bases are losing local support. We can't even make our payments to the underworld figures and crime bosses who have been supplying us with equipment. We need money."

The holo cuts to a medium shot of Seville. He points

towards the holorecorder. He is yelling.

"You out there, you Shashay and all your mindless alien friends, you've got money, and we want it."

The holo pans along Seville's arm, following the line of the blaster to Crying Dawn Singer. Seville fires, stunning the captive Shashay. The two pale humans let the unconscious Crying Dawn Singer fall to the floor.

"Here are the Rebellion's demands: first, a payment of 10 billion Imperial Credits, followed by a donation of equipment valued at that same amount. Second, we want you to support a Rebel Alliance base —"

Cut to a close-up of Seville. He is sneering.

"— on your precious homeworld."

The holo cuts to a close-up of Crying Dawn Singer, lying, unconscious, on the fur pelt of a young Wookiee. Seville speaks again, gleefully.

"You've got twenty standard hours to reach us through the news media or we'll start plucking the little feathered —"

The holo cuts off abruptly in a flurry of static. The static is shortly replaced by a caption, written in standard Imperial type:

"Transmission intercepted. Imperial Broadcast and Communications Agents tracing signal."

This caption remains for sixty seconds, then disappears.

The Security Camera

Read aloud:

INTERIOR: THE TORTURE ROOM. The albino Wookiee hangs from the ceiling. The space pirate Yearo Seville is speaking to an Imperial COMPNOR security officer. The angle is tilted vertically, indicating that the Droid must be tilted over on its side.

"Do you want me to take the Droid to Lalm?"

The officer responds with cold military efficiency.

"No, just the bird. Moff Owen wants to pick the Droid up personally. His personal Star Destroyer, the *Impending Doom*, is en route. Moff Owen wants his people to be the first to get to the information in the Droid's brain."

"We're just going to leave it here?"

"The *Impending Doom* will be here very soon. No one ever comes here anyway."

Seville's form looms larger in the camera's view as he closes in on the Droid. There is a loud CRUNCH! as the pirate kicks the Droid.

"Whatever you say. You're the pro. I'm just a pirate."

The Second Transmission

The holo begins with bright cheerful music. The words, "Special News Bulletin" spin through a holomap of the sector.

The holo cuts to a wide shot of a mauve and light grey news set. Two human news anchors are sitting at the anchor desk. "Rayter Sector News Central" is written on the wall behind the desk.

The cheerful music dims, and the holo zooms in to a medium close-up of the two anchors. Both are dressed in current Rayter Sector high fashion styles.

CUT TO: A close-up of the female anchor. After a few seconds, she begins speaking.

"This is a special bulletin concerning the disappearance of the great Shashay performer, Crying Dawn Singer."

A miniature holo of Crying Dawn Singer appears over her shoulder and the main holo camera zooms closer in on her.

"As we reported earlier, Crying Dawn Singer was abducted just minutes before a command perfor-

mance for Moff Owen at the opening ceremonies for the SecPAC. The parties responsible for his disappearance have now made themselves known."

CUT TO: Male co-anchor

"Yearo Seville, the pirate who now lends credibility to his atrocities by calling himself a political rebel, has taken credit for the abduction and is demanding a huge ransom."

The holo over the male's shoulder shows Seville shooting Crying Dawn Singer.

"Imperial Broadcast and Communications Agents and members of the Imperial Navy are attempting to locate the hidden base of this vile criminal before any harm can befall Crying Dawn Singer."

CUT TO: Close-up, female anchor

"We here at Rayter Sector News Central are deeply concerned, and we hope that Crying Dawn Singer is soon delivered back into the safety of Imperial space."

PULL BACK: A medium shot of both anchors. The transmission slowly fades.

Entry #527

Heading: Operation 45RA.1

Target: Rebel Alliance/ Shashay

From: Nak Farool, Director of Operation 45RA on the authority of Moff Nile Owen.

Destination: Moff Nile Owen, Rayter Sector

Message: Greetings, Excellency. Operation 45RA is proceeding as scheduled. Our men have captured Crying Dawn Singer. We have also confirmed that the Rebel Alliance was using the Shashay's valet/translator Droid as an intelligence agent.

The mobile broadcast station has been ordered to begin broadcasting the fabricated transmissions, beginning with the ransom demands of the Rebel

Alliance to the Shashay people. It will also broadcast news reports, official and unofficial, which implicate members of the Rebel Alliance in the disappearance of Crying Dawn Singer.

In order to minimize official involvement in this affair, custody of Crying Dawn Singer is being transferred to the Chief Administrator and Planetary Governor of TransGalMeg industries on Narg.

I am preparing the dispatch offering Imperial assistance to the Shashay people in effecting the safe return of their beloved Crying Dawn Singer. I believe that, very soon, any question of their alignment with the Rebel Alliance will be gone, and their system will be under our control.

— Transmission Complete —

Cut-Away to the Imperial Star Destroyer Impending Doom

Read aloud:

INTERIOR: MOFF OWEN'S QUARTERS.

Moff Owen is seated. Admiral Sahreel stands beside him. Nak Farool kneels on the floor. The holo of Nak Farool telling the press that Moff Owen will not rescue Crying Dawn Singer is projected into the center of the room. Moff Owen slowly stands and circles behind Farool.

"First, I arrive at Najarka and find that someone is stealing the Droid. Then I receive this from my agents on Narg. You have betrayed me."

Farool slowly raises his head, but dares not to turn and look at the enraged Moff.

"But, your Excellency, it is all part of the plan."

Owen pulls his blaster sidearm.

"The plan did not include vilifying me. Admiral, have the subspace relay station destroyed."

Sahreel makes a curt salute and makes a motion as if to head for the door. After a second he halts, sensing that the Moff has something more for him. He slowly nods at the Moff.

"Yes, your Excellency."

The Moff issues one other order.

"And have this place cleaned up."

Owen shoots Farool.

Cut-Away to the Impending Doom

Begin this episode by reading this cut-away to the Rebels. Read aloud:

INTERIOR: MOFF OWEN'S QUARTERS ABOARD THE IMPERIAL STAR DESTROYER IMPENDING DOOM. *Moff Owen sits in a large chair covered with rare furs. A small computer panel next to his left arm lights up, and a holo appears before the Imperial officer. The voice quickly reports.*

"Your Excellency, we have arrived at Narg."

A few seconds later, Admiral Sahreel enters the room, anxiously waiting for orders. Owen shifts in his chair, adjusting the furred cloak around his neck.

"Prepare my shuttle. Our first priority is to locate Crying Dawn Singer. I must be the one who returns him to the Shashay. Then I will execute Braig Farool."

The admiral turns, with a rushed, "Yes, your Excellency."

Cut to:

"THE ADMINISTRATION CENTER"

Chaos Breaks Loose

After the Rebels reach level 27 or 28, read this cut-away.
Read aloud:

TOGGEUS, ON THE FAR SIDE OF NARG. *Moff Owen and Admiral Sahreel are uncomfortably seated in minimalist chrome chairs inside a lushly carpeted and dimly lit room in the TransGalMeg Industries Conference Center. A young Naval lieutenant walks briskly into the room. He salutes.*

"Admiral, we have located the Shashay. He is in custody in the administration center in Grig, but we have noticed some activity and believe that they may be attempting to move him."

Admiral Sahreel defers to Moff Owen for the final decision.

"Excellency, what do you wish?"

Moff Owen considers for a moment.

"Retrieve the alien. We must return him to the Shashay, or we will suffer greatly."

The admiral turns to the lieutenant.

"Inform Perrsta that he must not allow the alien to be removed from the administration center. Put the ready crew on a sled with a full load of stormtroopers and drop them on the administration center. They must bring back the Shashay — unharmed."

Lieutenant, saluting, "Yes, sir!"

Cut to:

"LEVEL TWENTY-SEVEN"

Cut-Away to the Bridge of the Impending Doom

Read aloud:

INTERIOR: THE BRIDGE OF THE *IMPENDING DOOM*. *Executive Captain Marok is receiving instructions from Moff Owen on the planet's surface. Owen is communicating through a small hologram, but his rage over the recent turn of events is clearly evident.*

"Take their ship. I cannot allow them to escape with the Shashay. Do not harm the creature—I don't care if a dozen pilots die, but I want the singer captured unharmed."

"Yes, your Excellency."

The holo of Owen disappears, and Marok turns to a subordinate.

"Send out Yellow Squadron."

Cut to:

"TIE FIGHTERS"

Escape Pod Down

The Rebels have destroyed the Death Star at the Battle of Yavin. Angered by this defeat, the Empire has vowed to hunt down and extinguish the Rebel Alliance. Guided by probe droids and deep-cover spies, the Imperial Fleet has sent its powerful Star Destroyers far and wide to eliminate any Rebel activity. The Empire has at its command thousands of TIE fighters, AT-AT walkers, and dreaded Imperial stormtroopers. These forces are dedicated to the destruction of the Rebel Alliance.

Far off in the Outer Rim, Rebel X-wing starfighters have wreaked havoc on Imperial shipping. Striking from a hidden base on Edan II, the Rebels have captured valuable supplies, weapons and medicine to aid the Alliance in the Galactic Civil War. Their successes have been small. If they continue, Edan Base could pose a greater threat to the Empire.

Even now an Imperial Star Destroyer is on its way to Edan II to destroy the base and take control of the planet. You will help determine whether the Rebels survive or the Empire triumphs. The Alliance needs you to strike back against Imperial tyranny. You are about to embark on a fantastic saga by playing the

A lone sentry stood in the observation tower overlooking the dense forest. Behind him rose a small rocky hill which housed the Rebels' secret base here on Edan II.

The Alliance established Edan Base to house a squadron of X-wing and Y-wing starfighters, their pilots and crews, and the various Rebel operatives who wandered in and out from nearby systems. It was the hub of Rebellion activity in the sector.

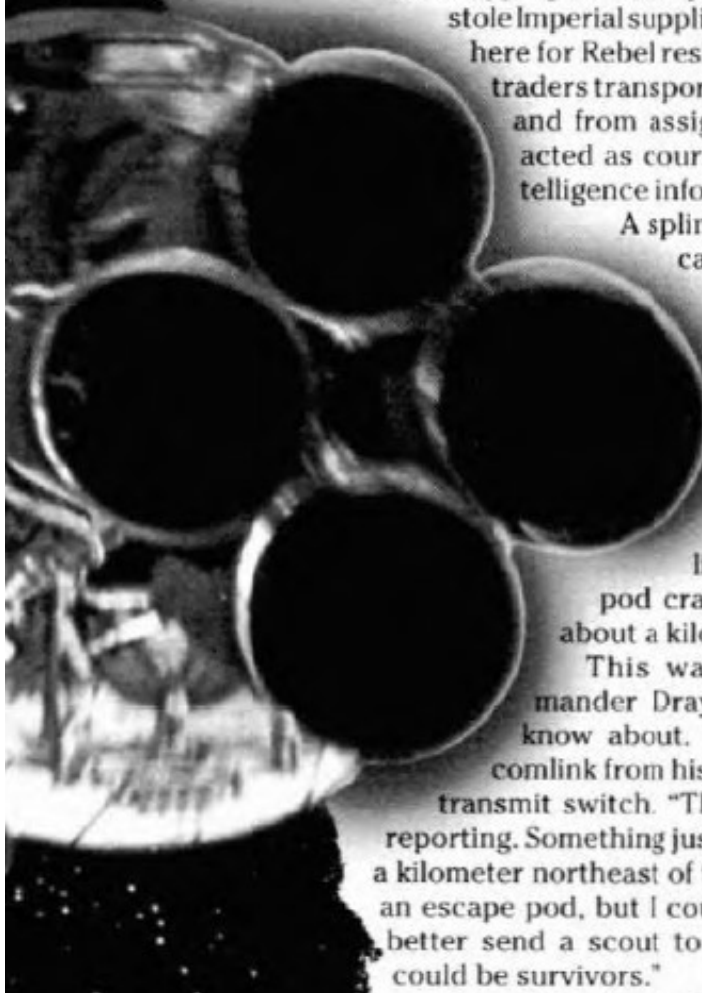
The sentry saw a glint of metal on the horizon. He raised his macrobinoculars to his eyes and ranged in on the two X-wing fighters coming back from a mission. Before long they were roaring overhead on their approach to the landing bay entrance, little more than a large cave in the rocky hillside. The sentry waved to the pilots. The starfighters were returning from a nearby system, where they had no doubt shot down a few Imperial TIE fighters. The sentry would hear about the mission later, when the pilots sat around bragging about their exploits in the crew lounge.


Since the Alliance defeated the Death Star at the Battle of Yavin, the Empire had stepped up its measures to crush the Rebels. Edan Base had played an important role in keeping the flame of rebellion burning in this area. The starfighters harassed Imperial shipping in nearby systems. Smugglers stole Imperial supplies and delivered them here for Rebel resistance fighters. Free-traders transported Alliance agents to and from assignments nearby, and acted as couriers for important intelligence information.

A splinter of light in the sky caught the sentry's eye.

He raised his macrobinoculars to his eyes and peered upward. Something was ripping through the atmosphere on a steep descent. It looked like an escape pod. The pod crashed into the forest about a kilometer away.

This was something Commander Drayson would want to know about. The sentry pulled a comlink from his belt and pressed the transmit switch. "This is Sentry Post A9 reporting. Something just crash-landed about a kilometer northeast of the base. Looked like an escape pod, but I couldn't be sure. You'd better send a scout to check it out. There could be survivors."





Captain Tulimus stood on the *Havoc's* bridge. His Imperial Star Destroyer hung like a silent giant over the planet below. Behind him, officers and technicians in crew pits were working furiously at their controls.

Several TIE fighters flew past the viewport as the *Havoc* maneuvered into orbit. They had found no Rebel ships in the system, but were screening the Star Destroyer in case the Alliance tried to spring a surprise attack.

An Imperial Army officer approached the Captain. "Colonel Deers. We are orbiting Edan II, site of a hidden Rebel base and ... well, other objectives of Imperial interest."

"Sir, I have prepared my troops for a ground assault ..." the Colonel began.

Captain Tulimus raised a hand to silence the officer. "That will be unnecessary."

"But, sir, our reconnaissance probe droid showed the base is protected by a shield. They also have an ion cannon — should they choose to evacuate, we would have little chance of catching them."

"I have taken care of that," Captain Tulimus said. "We have a spy within who will ensure the shield is down and the ion cannon disabled when we begin our bombardment."

"Should I prepare a small advanced force to move in once the shields are down?" Colonel Deers asked. "Perhaps a squad of troopers with an armed shuttle — they can bottle up any fleeing Rebels until the heavier assault equipment arrives."

Tulimus stroked his chin. "Very good idea, Colonel. Make sure they stay a good distance from the base at first. My turbolaser batteries will turn the target into a pile of rubble."

"I will prepare an expeditionary force at once," Colonel Deers said.

"Yes. Keep the rest of your troops on standby. They will track down any fugitives. You are in charge of all planetside operations. All areas of strategic importance must be occupied once we have destroyed the Rebel Base."

Captain Tulimus dismissed Colonel Deers, then turned to a senior bridge officer. "Target all turbolaser batteries and standby. You will commence the bombardment on my mark."

Corsair cursed as his fingers blurred over the X-wing's flight computer. The base hangar's ceiling trembled again. As several suspended conduits buckled, dust rained down on his starfighter's canopy. Corsair glanced upward. The hangar bay was littered with debris, but his launch path was still clear. If he could just get the engines warmed up ...

Six TIE bombers flying in standard echelon formation screamed over the Edan landscape. The Rebel base, already crippled by the orbital bombardment, had ceased resisting early in the siege. Now the Imperials knew the Rebel vermin would flee their nest and scatter into the wilderness. That was the reaction the TIE bombers were to stifle. The lead ship roared forward and issued commands to its escorts. "Omega group: ten seconds to target. Synchronized drop on my mark."

The X-wing was silent in the desolate hangar bay. Inside, Corsair was hoping for an engineering miracle. Without an R2 unit in back, the ship couldn't reroute his commands around the damaged components. He yelled, punching the flight computer in complete frustration. The panel sparked as two sundered wires deep within the computer connected with the force of the impact. The engines immediately started to cycle as Corsair cheered in triumph. Then he looked out of the cockpit — a tight formation of ships was flying extremely low, directly toward the base. Corsair fidgeted as he waited for the engines to build significant power to launch.

The six TIE bombers soared over the last rise before Edan Base. As the landscape blurred beneath them, the targeting computer in each starfighter beeped twice in unison. The first of the shimmering spheres dropped from their bomb bays.

The engine meter crept upward at an agonizingly slow pace. Corsair glared at it, hoping that his will alone could

influence the physics of the ion drives. Then he heard the roar of the TIEs overhead, and the unnerving whistle of multiple objects dropping from above. "Close enough," he mumbled, and jammed the X-wing's throttle to its farthest forward position. There was a roar behind him. As his ship shuddered under the sudden and premature acceleration, he saw the hangar bay begin to recede behind him.

The first high-yield proton bomb struck the back of the hangar bay. The other volleys followed, walking explosions across the once-proud Edan Base. As if it had a last request, the base spat out a lone X-wing fighter, which immediately banked hard and rocketed away from the dying base.

Gasping for breath, Corsair checked over his shoulder at the terrain swirling beneath him. He had to clear this area fast and put down before the orbital energy scanners could react to his launch. As he set a course, he thought he saw several groups of footsoldiers running from their former home, diving for cover in the lush Edan forest. Given their variety of uniforms, they could only be Rebels.

Good luck, he silently wished them, and see you at the Rendezvous Point.

Watch Out For The Wookiee



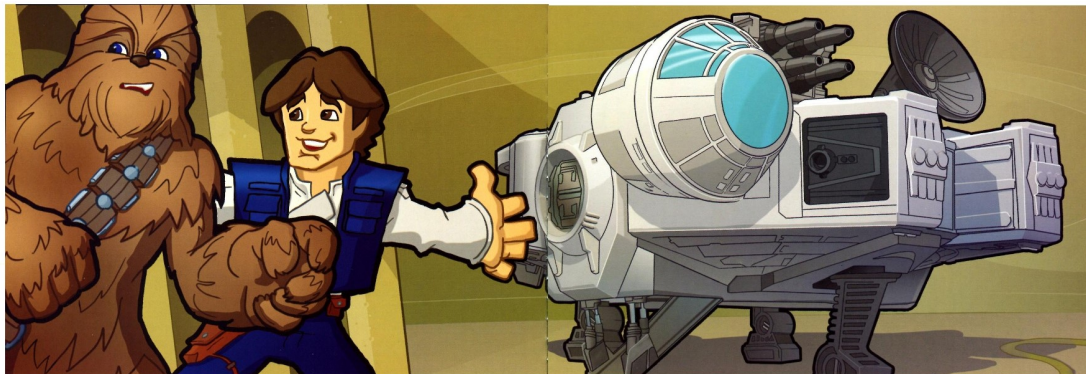
Han Solo and his trusty Wookiee friend, Chewbacca, are on a mission - a mission to escape the stormtroopers who are closing in on them!

"Looks like trouble," Han tells Chewie. "Let's get out of here!"

"Aawrrr!" agrees Chewie.

"Follow me," Han assures his pal. "I know my way around!"

Han leads Chewie through the spaceport of Mos Eisley.



Han and Chewie finally reach the *Millennium Falcon*.

"See?" Han asks. "Just where I left it. Now let's get going!"

"Rowrrr!" Chewie protests.

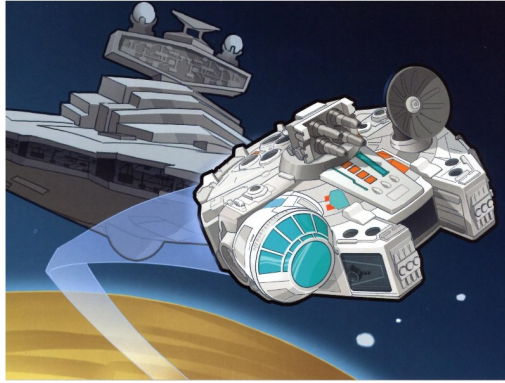
"The hyperdrive?" Han asks. "Of course I checked it. Don't worry so much. Nobody knows this ship better than me!"

"Aargh?" Chewie questions.

"Of course I'm sure!" Han replies. "She's running perfectly. Now let's go!"

In the cockpit, Han leans back, resting his hands behind his head.

"See, Chewie? I've got everything under control - as usual."



Suddenly, an Imperial Star Destroyer closes in on the *Falcon*.
"Uh-oh," Han warns. "Looks like we have company! Jump to lightspeed!"
Chewie lets out a nervous howl.
"What do you mean the hyperdrive isn't working?! Try it again!" yells Han.
But Chewie's right. It isn't working!



Chewie quickly spots a nearby planet. "Raawrr!"
"Got it, Chewie! We're going in, but it's going to be a rough landing.
Hang on!" Han replies.
Han safely lands the *Millennium Falcon* in a clearing in the forest.



"I think we're safe for now," Han says. "There's no one around for miles."
Chewie looks at Han. "Raargh!"
"What do you mean you told me so!? And anyway, I can fix the hyperdrive in less time than it takes to say 'Wookiee'," Han answers.
Han opens a hatch and a pile of tools lands on his head. "Oww!" he yelps.



Chewie laughs. "Laugh it up, fuzzball!" Han snaps.

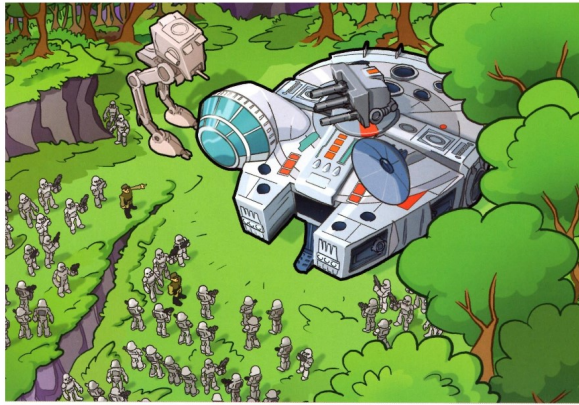
"Aaugh!" Chewie responds.

"Fine!" Han yells. "I'll fix this myself – without your help! Go ahead – get out of here – and stay out of trouble!"

Chewie throws up his hairy arms and walks away.

Han quickly gets to work, trying to repair the hyperdrive.

"I can fix it myself!" he grumbles.



Meanwhile, outside the *Millennium Falcon*, stormtroopers surround the ship. They quietly make their way inside and capture Han.



Escorted out in handcuffs, Han mumbles under his breath, "I sure could use a Wookiee right now."

Suddenly, a familiar howl fills the air...



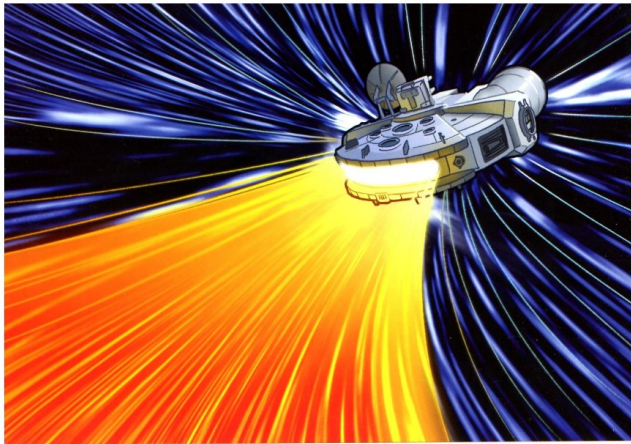
...and an entire army of Wookiees comes out of the woods, surrounding the stormtroopers.
Chewie leads the way!



The Wookiees close in on the stormtroopers and lead them away into the forest.
Chewie looks down at Han. "Rowww!"
"I know, I know," Han replies. "But first, get me out of these handcuffs!"



Back inside the ship, Chewie calmly fixes the hyperdrive.
"Thanks, Chewie," says Han. "Looks like I needed your help after all."



The *Millennium Falcon* takes off, shifting into hyperdrive.
"And I guess you are pretty smart..." admits Han. "...for a fuzzball!"
"Aawgrh!"





ROARRRRR!

YEAH,
I SEE
'EM!!!

THE FALCON'S
SENSORS JUST PICKED
UP A DESERTED MOON
DOWN THERE -- WE BREAK
ATMOSPHERE AND THOSE
STAR DESTROYERS
WON'T BE ABLE TO
FOLLOW US!

HANG
ON!

"ROWLLL!"

"SURE, CHEWIE, JUST KEEP
THOSE IMPERIALS OFF
OUR TAIL UNTIL I LAND.
OTHERWISE WE'LL BE
FLOATING HOME AND LEIA
AND HER REVOLUTION
WILL NEVER GET
THEIR SUPPLIES!"

BOOM!
BOOM!
BOOM!

BA-DUMP-DUMP-CRASH!

HRRRRR?

HEY,
ANY LANDING
YOU CAN WALK
AWAY FROM,
RIGHT?

SHORTLY...

SHE'S
TAKEN A LOT OF
DAMAGE, CHEWIE.
ONE OF HER DROID
BRAINS IS
FRIED.

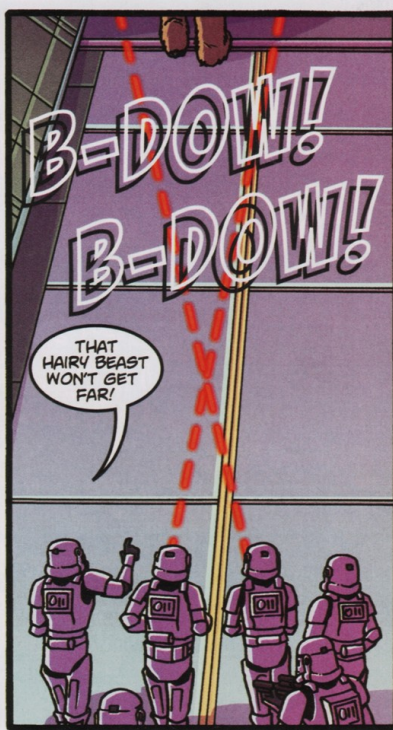
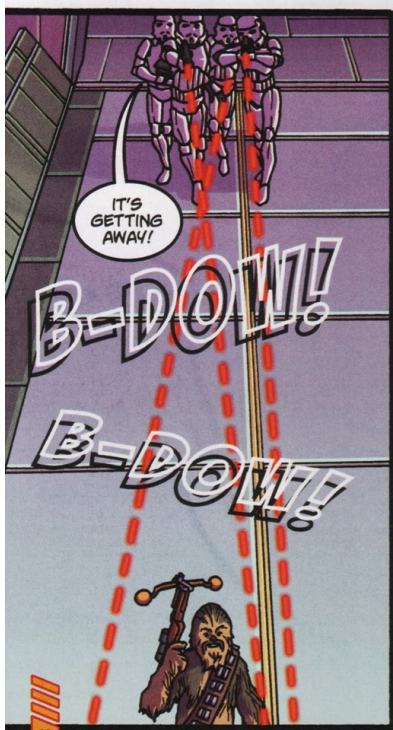
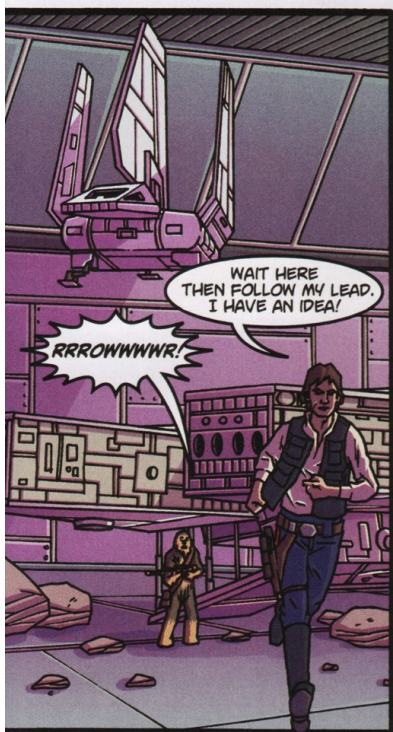
WE'LL HAVE
TO SCAVENGE UP
SOME PARTS IF WE'RE
GONNA GET HER UP
IN THE AIR
AGAIN.

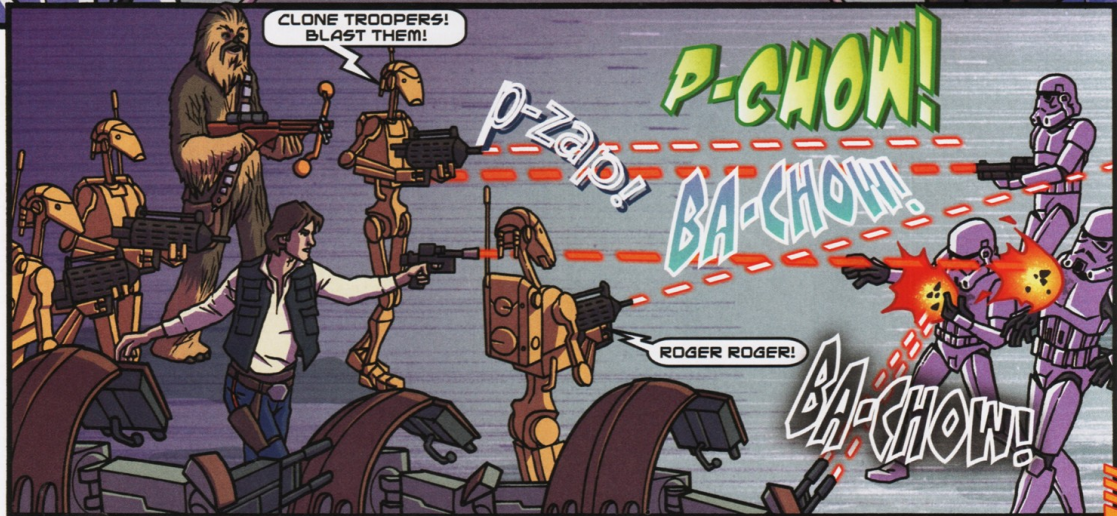
ARRRRRAAR!

YEAH, WE'D
BETTER MOVE
QUICK -- IT WON'T
TAKE LONG FOR
THOSE IMPERIALS
TO FIND US.













PREVIOUSLY: ESCAPING AN IMPERIAL BLOCKADE, HAN SOLO AND CHEWBACCA MADE URGENT REPAIRS TO THE MILLENNIUM FALCON USING AN ANCIENT STORE OF PARTS DATING BACK TO THE CLONE WARS. UTILIZING THE CPU'S (CENTRAL PROCESSING UNITS) FROM SEVERAL SUPER TACTICAL DROIDS, THE REBEL SMUGGLERS GOT THE FALCON BACK IN THE AIR -- ONLY TO RUN INTO...

HAN SOLO,
CAPTAIN OF THE
MILLENNIUM FALCON.
REBEL, SMUGGLER.

CHEWBACCA,
WOOKIEE CO-PILOT,
HAN'S BEST FRIEND.

IMPERIALS!

DIDN'T WE
JUST LEAVE THIS
PARTY?

HRRRONK?!

MY SPACESHIP--
MY ENEMY!

WRITER RIK HOSKIN ARTIST & COLOURIST LUCA BERTELE LETTERER: DAVID LEACH







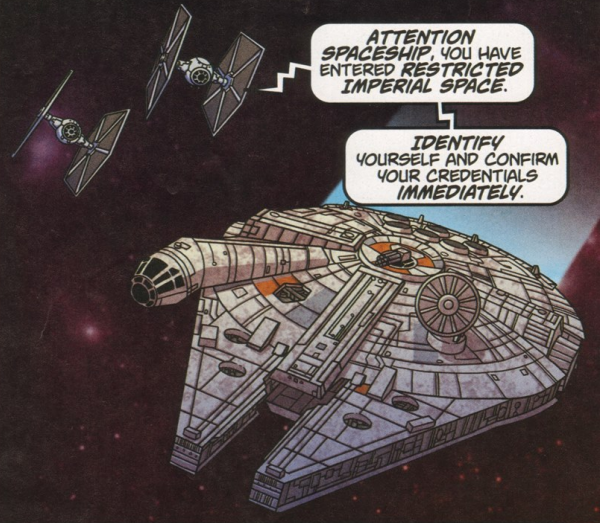




HRRR?

YEAH, THE WHOLE PLANET IS THICK WITH IMPERIALS LIKE STINK ON A BANTHA--

MORE'N EVEN WE CAN HANDLE.



ATTENTION SPACESHIP. YOU HAVE ENTERED RESTRICTED IMPERIAL SPACE.

IDENTIFY YOURSELF AND CONFIRM YOUR CREDENTIALS IMMEDIATELY.



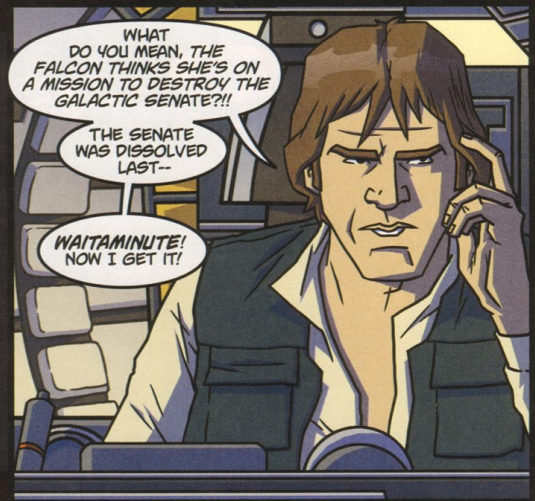
I REPEAT, IDENTIFY YOURSELF IMMEDIATELY OR WE WILL BE FORCED TO DISABLE YOU WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE!

YOU HEAR THAT?

WE CAN'T BE SEEN HERE, CHEWIE--

WE'RE WANTED MEN EVER SINCE WE HOOKED UP WITH LEIA AND HER REVOLUTION. WE NEED TO TURN THIS SHIP AROUND BEFORE...

HROARRRR!



WHAT DO YOU MEAN, THE FALCON THINKS SHE'S ON A MISSION TO DESTROY THE GALACTIC SENATE?!!

THE SENATE WAS DISSOLVED LAST--

WAITAMINUTE! NOW I GET IT!



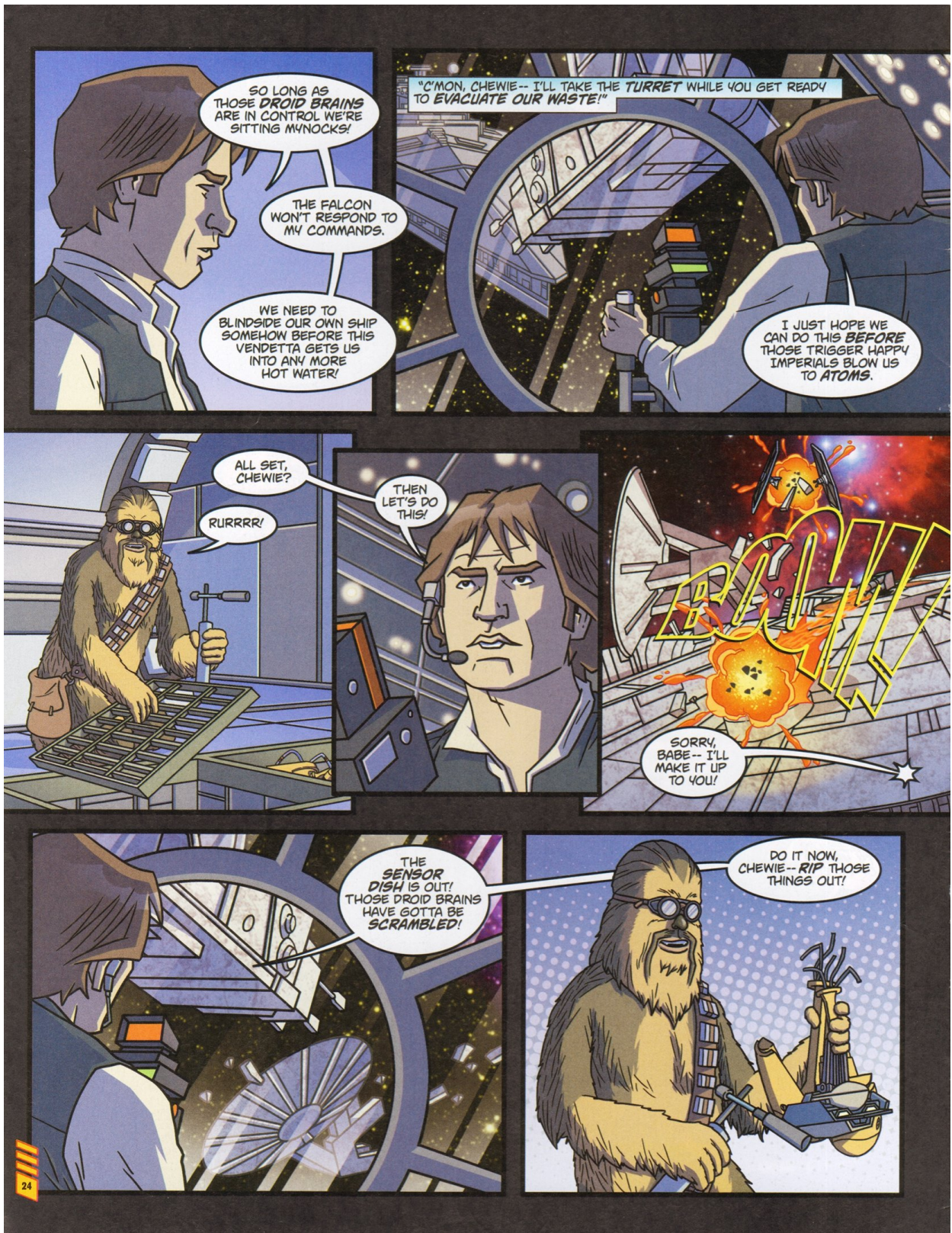
THIS SUICIDE MISSION IS THIRTY YEARS OUT OF DATE!

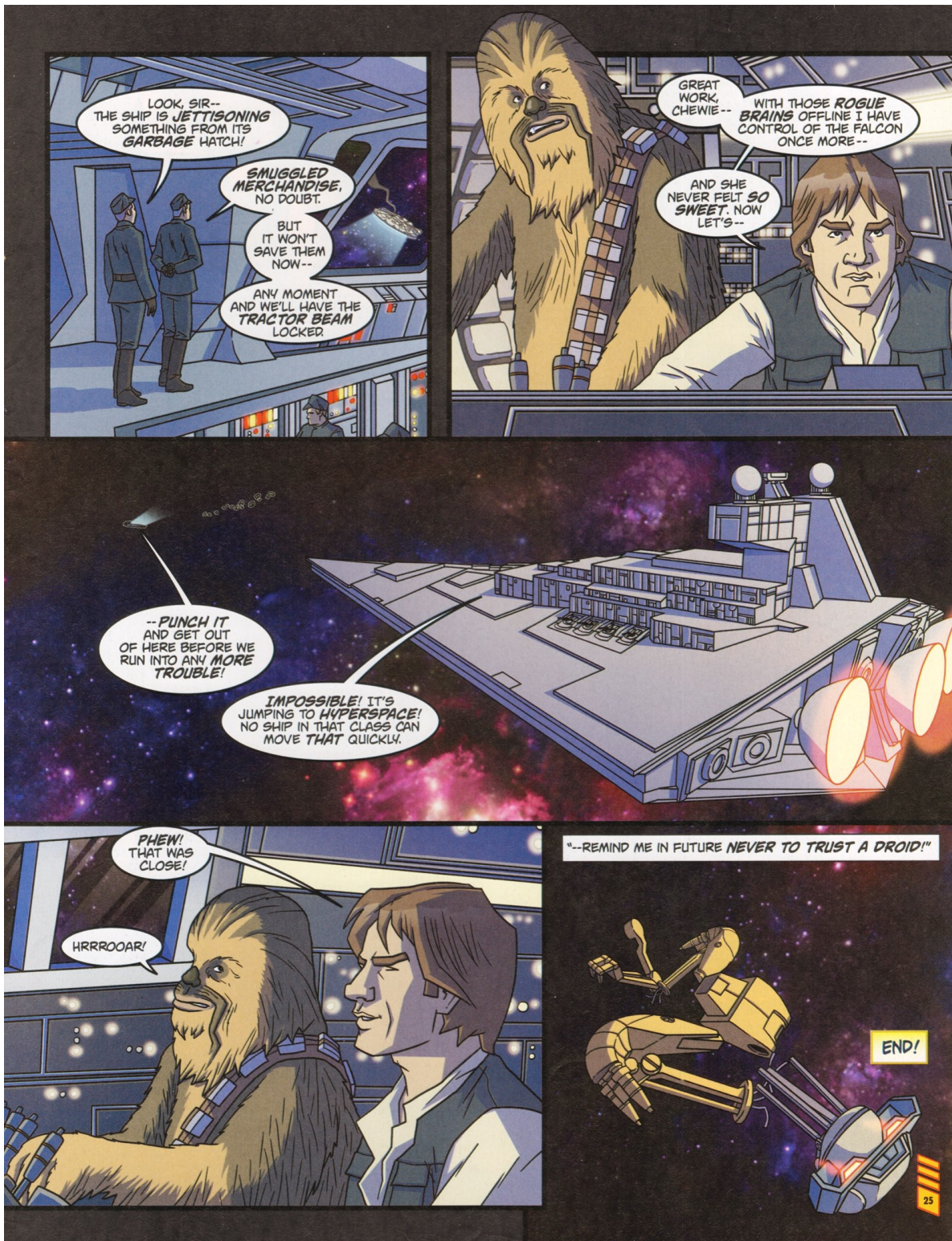
THOSE DROID PARTS WE USED TO PATCH UP THE FALCON ARE NURSING ONE HECK OF AN OLD GRUDGE! AND IT'S TAKEN CONTROL OF THE SHIP'S TRIPLE CPU'S!



A TRACTOR BEAM WILL BE APPLIED MOMENTARILY, UNIDENTIFIED SPACESHIP!

DO NOT STRAY FROM YOUR PATH.





Elite Commando Unit Formed at Emperor's Command

IMPERIAL CITY, CORUSCANT -- In the months following Rebel uprisings on Gerrard V and Ralltiir, and more significantly, in the aftermath of the Battle of [Yavin](#), it has become increasingly clear to military analysts that the traditional organization of the Imperial Army is ill-suited to responding to the hit-and-fade tactics favored by Rebel guerilla units.

Four months ago, [the Emperor](#), in a classified executive order, commanded that a new unit of elite troopers be formed to respond in kind. The existence of the new unit has now been declassified, and *IDD* has been granted the privilege of providing the first coverage of the Imperial Storm Commandos, as the new unit is to be known.

The Storm Commandos will be made up of line units, as well as tech, saboteur, and assault specialists. Typical Storm Commando missions are expected to be covert operations, to include the extraction of captured Imperials and Rebel criminals, infiltration of Rebel bases, and siege-breaking. The units will be armed with blaster carbines and [blaster pistols](#). A new design of battle armor is rumored to be under development, but no details are currently available.

The first class of Storm Commandos is currently undergoing advanced training on Carida. Colonel Crix [Madine](#), who was placed in command of the unit by Grand Moff Tanniel (both Raithal Academy graduates), is expected to lead his men into the field sometime in the next few weeks.

35:9:27/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/GEN

Has Anyone Seen Solo Lately?

Nar Shaddaa Node

Last reliable thing we heard about Han Solo was that he had offed a two-bit bounty hunter on Tatooine months and months ago. Have he and the Wook dropped into the Maw? We're hearing some awfully strange rumors around here. If anyone runs into Solo, tell him things are heating up plenty quick with Jabba the Hutt. Seems Heater is interviewing bounty hunters. We also noticed Solo's name has appeared in the latest quarterly update of the *Imperial Enforcement DataCore*. Han, buddy, what have you been up to?

Cynabar's InfoNet

Galactic Battlegrounds: Occupation Of Reytha

After the Rebellion lost its headquarters on Yavin 4, its forces took over the planet Reytha for its extensive food supplies. Reytha's governor, Antes Belladar, was considered by Imperial Intelligence to be either soft or a traitor, and the Rebels were able to establish bases on the Montrosa Islands, as well as at Reytha Minor. Bandits took over the the Food Storage facilities at Breeda, and Page's Commandos attacked the city of Teks. The incursions grew to the point that Governor Belladar was forced to call in reinforcements. Darth Vader arrived with a strike force and ordered his troops to go to the abandoned base at Yeere, with the probe droids scouting ahead. The base was reactivated, and the Imperial forces started fighting back against the Rebels. Eventually, the Vipers reported back to Vader regarding an attack on Teks during herding of nerfs discovered to the east of Yeere. The attacks on Teks were later identified to have originated from Reytha Minor, a Rebel-occupied city to the north.

Additional units were outfitted at Yeere for the attack. The Imperials destroyed the bandits' troop center in Breeda, and after Page's Commandos attacked a stormtrooper squad in Teks, retook the town. Although initially underestimating the size of the Rebel base in Reytha Minor, Darth Vader led his forces in destroying its command center.

As the campaign went on, Darth Vader's frustration with Belladar grew, and with suspicions about the Governor's true allegiance, Vader finally had enough and killed Belladar with a Force choke. Darth Vader then ordered all Imperial forces on Reytha to converge at the Montrosa Islands. Along with other portions of the Imperial Military, he attacked the Rebel bases on the nearby islands, eventually hunting down every unit.

With the threat to Reytha gone, Darth Vader continued his search for the Rebel leadership in the Outer Rim Territories.

TriNebulon News: 35:10:9

Anti-[Empire](#) Party Undermines Dentaal Government

CALIF CITY, DENTAAL -- In a brazen move calculated to embarrass Governor Taliff, remnants of the disbanded Dentaalian House met and passed a resolution declaring that Dentaal would no longer recognize the Governor's Imperial charter late last night. The resolution was quickly ratified by local chapters of the rogue Dentaal Independence Party, and by morning the federal workers' union had declared its intention to strike, virtually ensuring that the Dentaalian government will soon grind to a halt.

Governor Taliff's office has issued a statement declaring the actions of the defunct parliament meaningless and lacking in legitimacy. In the statement, he warned workers to report to their job sites or risk severe repercussions, and issued an arrest order for Dentaal Independence Party officers and those harboring them.

The Imperially run government of Dentaal has been very unpopular with the local population since Governor Taliff took direct control of the government nine months ago. Government spending on infrastructure projects has been drastically slashed, and many industries have been nationalized, sending the local economy into a nose-dive.

35:10:16/IHV/G76D/COR.1.IPC/CUL

ISO Announces Mid-Rim Tour

Imperial City, Coruscant

The Imperial Symphony Orchestra is preparing to embark on its first tour outside the Core Worlds region in 15 years. The ISO has been engaged for the past five years in a special program promoting Imperial High Culture in the Core. Previously, Mid-Rim worlds had been unable or unwilling to submit the substantial sponsorship fees necessary to book the prestigious ISO. Now, with New Order party representatives more securely established in the political fabric of Mid-Rim governments, and with the establishment of all-powerful governorships, many of the ideological and financial obstacles of past decades have been cleared away.

The tour program is expected to focus on recent Neoclassical compositions favored by the Emperor, including several selections from Harbin-re opera, waltzes and ganther dances composed by Nabicii Futana, and various marches from the Clone Wars era.

Imperial HoloVision

Independent Traders Infonet 35:10:22

Fondor Closed to Civilian Traffic

UNSPECIFIED MID-CORE NODE -- The Fondor system is currently the site of a massive Imperial construction project and has been closed to all civilian traffic, according to a member of the Corellian Merchant's Guild who asked not to be named. A military blockade surrounds the Fondor shipyards, with orders to destroy trespassers.

A great deal of cargo traffic is passing between Fondor and Gandeal. The CMG member surmises that new hyperlanes have been opened by the Empire to serve the system, judging by the number of bulk freighters passing into and out of the shipyards. The shipyard activity suggests that the system is now a Star Destroyer construction site, but this level of security is rather unusual in such a site. So, too, is the large number of flagships present in the system.

It is a shame that the system is sealed to independent traders. There are always opportunities for enterprising spacers in a situation involving a workforce with curtailed travel options. Workers in such an environment tend to develop a taste for items not to be found in an Imperial commissary. However, only heavy-duty space transports of Camura Lines and Entea Corporation have been awarded contracts to serve the system, and have permission to use the Code DENA-1101-22-6 permits which allow free passage.

35:10:24/IHV/G76D/COR.1.IPC/POL

Festival Public Executions Canceled: Officials Site Security Concerns

Imperial City, Coruscant

Celebrants of New Year Fete Week in Imperial City looking forward to the annual public executions of convicted Enemies of the Empire will be disappointed to hear that the executions will not be carried out as planned. Citing security concerns, officials announced today that the executions would be carried out in private for the first time in 11 years. No specific reason for the change in plans was provided.

Imperial HoloVision

Imperial HoloVision: 35:10:28

Dentaal Declares Independence, Expels Governor

CALIF CITY, DENTAAL -- In a move that stunned political observers, the Dentaal Independence Party, with full public support, ousted the Imperial administration of Governor Taliff and took direct control of the Dentaalian government it had vacated only nine months earlier. The commanders of the Dentaalian Navy and Army, nominally under Imperial control, have declared their loyalty to the new government, and are moving to isolate and disarm Imperial garrisons.

The leader of the rogue government, Hancc Rellow, has declared Dentaal a free planet, and affirmed his desire to maintain cordial relations with [the Empire](#). Governor Taliff has been deported from Dentaal by the new administration, and is under orders to report to [Coruscant](#) to explain himself.

The Emperor has made no official comment on the matter, though the Imperial Navy is demanding immediate action. With unrest a constant problem on peripheral Imperial holdings such as Sappire and Dakshee, experts do not expect [the Emperor](#) to remain neutral. Certainly the Dentaal affair is being watched very closely by the Rebel organization.

Mystery on Gamma Station

It's always uncomfortable when you wake up in a strange place. When you wake up in a strange place with siren's blaring and you don't know how you got there, it's just scary. The last thing I remember was leaving my home on Ryloth to make a Ryll delivery. It was nothing more than a short trip to Tatooine to meet up with an honest pilot who could run some supplies to Corellia and then I float home with some well-earned credits. Easy money.

The next thing I know, the sirens are blaring and some protocol droid is blabbering on my comlink and I'm in a strange med-bay. The golden protocol droid kept helping me escape - - or at least he wanted me to think I was escaping. He helped me find a blaster and a way out of the medical bay. I blew the door controls with my blaster and to my surprise, there was a huge Wookiee, a droid and a smuggler. Without so much as a "hello my name is", he started going on about the war and the Empire and everything happened so fast. Without missing a beat, we were running down a hallway, shooting Imperial troops and "escaping" with someone who must've been a smuggler trying to steal something from the Empire. All I wanted was to make a few credits, not get stuck with some wild-eyed smuggler with delusions of grandeur about overthrowing the Empire!

I was happy when we finally landed at Tansarii Point Station. I didn't know the name of the place when we first landed. I didn't know I was on the other side of the galactic core either, but it was easy enough to find out talking to the locals. I'm still not clear on when I lost consciousness sitting in a Tatooine cantina, but I can't say that wasn't the first time that's happened either.

Thankfully, everyone on the station was pretty helpful. I figured it would be easy to make some credits. This guy Solo let me know that

the person on the station who knew what was going on was Inaldra. If I wanted any kind of work, I should start with her. I wandered around a bit. There was a hustle and bustle in the halls (I almost went into the cantina, but I'm still not sure if that's how I got into this mess in the first place so I decided to skip it). I found her office easy enough alright; now to get some work and get off this station.

One job stuck out among the rest. An explorer named Frelka came back from a nearby space station with some tall tales and something about a missing protocol droid. Easy enough.

I found Frelka in the cantina. He was a pretty irritable Rodian. It seemed like he didn't even want to talk to me until I told him I could get to his droid on Gamma Station, "Yeah, don't go to Gamma Station kid. Nothing good comes out of there...let me tell you!" The cranky explorer's warnings just made me more curious. I insisted on taking the job. I made sure he had the credits to pay me and then he laughed through his long Rodian snout.

My trip to Gamma Station was short, but there were a lot of freighters in the area. There's a trick that my father taught me when he first took me out flying. He said, "Son, if you listen to the space chatter, you can almost always find a way out of a tough spot. You just have to listen." All these years later, here I was floating off to an asteroid space station listening to the pilots chatter while they waited for landing clearances.

I found out how I probably got into this mess. Of course, all of this was rumor, but the same discussions kept coming up on the com over and over. It seems that Bounty Hunters and mercenaries were kidnapping unsuspecting people and turning them over to the Empire. Some of them ended up here. Those that did never came back. The pilots imagined all sorts of horrors that might be on the station....

I finally got my own landing clearance and headed into the station. It wasn't hard to find Frelka's droid. E-5KL was standing in the main entrance to the station. Not hard to find at all. E-5KL was a protocol droid and they always like to talk. He told me about the Car'das allies and how they protected the top layers of the station.

Then it started getting creepy. He started telling me about the Rak'qua and their "creations". Now I knew what the pilots had been talking about. Even still, I was feeling pretty bold and decided to head down into the bowels of Gamma Station.

At first, I came across a couple of rouge droids and one Nautolan. Easy...or so I thought. Just inside the first door, I was attacked by a gang of Nautolans - - these must have been the Rak'qua that the droid was talking about!

I couldn't hold them off. I headed back up the cave to where the Car'das patrol where it was safe. Luckily I hadn't gone too deep and ended in more trouble than I bargained for. This became a grudge now and I wanted to find out what was at the bottom of the hauntings on Gamma Station. It wasn't long before some other travelers ended up on the station and I was able to get a small raiding party together. A young Officer and a Bounty Hunter showed up on the station. We each had our reasons, but we were determined to find out what was going on here!

We made our way down into the control room where we were attacked by the Rak'qua again. We had strength in numbers this time! Here we were, three strangers on a space station in Ord Mantell space. How exciting! Now all we had to do was find out how deep this place went.

We worked our way twisting through hallways fighting off droids and discovering labs and holding cells. There were many mysteries in Gamma Station and it seemed we had stumbled across only one of them. We battled Rak'qua tribal members and droids all the way through the station. If we hadn't been together, I was sure we wouldn't have made it back. I don't even think we made it all the way down. The Officer had mentioned that there was a great beast in the belly of the station. We couldn't find it.

Can you?

A Crisis of Allegiance

Dathnaeya sighed heavily as she finished the report. Saving the information, she sat her data pad down on her desk and looked out the window. The view

from her office in the Dearic capital building was not spectacular. She could barely see the Dearic theater house over the tops of some generic office buildings, and off in the distance a couple of grand hotels.

“Time for a break,” she muttered to herself. Logging her time, she strode to the door of her tiny office. Her normal pattern was to head for the balcony at the back of the building overlooking the rolling hills south of the city. Today, though, she needed to be closer...actually a part of the peaceful view.

It would shorten her break somewhat, but quality was more important than quantity at the moment. Checking out her standard issue pistol with the guard at the front of the building, she circled around to the east and walked through the gate in the low city wall that was more for decoration than to keep any thing in or out.

Several more minutes found her outside the wall, opposite her favorite balcony spot, staring out into the vast, empty hill country south of town. Her eyes adjusted so that she focused on nothing and she let her mind drift.

Dathnaeya was startled out of her reverie by the chirping of her communication link. Frowning at the interruption she reached to turn the annoying device completely off, but noticed who was coming her. “Taarna,” she said simply.

“Dathnaeya, do you remember our conversation the other night after the Fed Dub briefing?” Taarna was an older man, a distinguished member of the Corellian Security Force. It was he that originally trained the young girl who was now one of CorSec’s most promising officers.

“I remember. I still don’t have enough information,” she replied.

“That’s why I called. I’m sending you an individual who should be able to gather that information for you. They have done some work for me recently which was very impressive. This individual is not only efficient and thorough in their work, but they are very observant, capable of make wise decisions, where others would move too quickly or jump to conclusions.” Taarna smiled the doting smile of a father to his beloved daughter.

“Alright. This person will be able to investigate for me without harming

my position here at CorSec. I've got a couple of contacts they may be able to work for and by that, gain enough information for me to finally make up my mind. I'll set up the meetings." Dathnaeya paused for a moment, running her hand through her flowing red hair. "You know, this may mean we won't be working together any more."

"My dear, if it means you can sleep at night, I will be content. Whatever choice you make, I will always be here for you," Taarna smiled warmly.

A few weeks later, Dathnaeya was standing in that same spot outside the fence, leaning against it. Coming towards her with the wary eyes and easy gait of someone who had seen a lot of action was someone definitely not native to Dearic. After looking her up and down, the stranger tilted their head and spoke, "Ms. Loessin?"

Having carefully prepared what she was going to say, she sighed heavily and began, "I stand here often, staring up at the stars, and all I can see is war. I feel it moving to envelope me though I've tried to avoid it. If I remain on the side and do nothing, I know I will be destroyed for certain. My name is Dathnaeya Loessin. Agent Taarna said you are thorough, efficient, and more importantly, wise. I need you to help me now, as you helped him..."

Calling On All Artists

EMPEROR ANNOUNCES PLANS TO TAKE OVER ART WORLD, REBELS LOOK TO PROTON TORPEDO IDEA WITH ART OF THEIR OWN

Galactic News Network (GNN) - In what many are calling a startling announcement, Emperor Palpatine has said today that he is calling on all Imperial artists to create an Imperial painting that will usurp all masterpieces from ages past.

This great commission, according to one anonymous Imperial insider, is the Emperor's first step in taking over the creative arts industry.

"The Emperor wishes to rid the galaxy of those identified as degenerates and the work that is associated with them."

At press time, the Emperor was unavailable for comment but an Imperial officer did release the following statement: "There could be no greater honor

than having your painting selected by the Emperor himself and representing the height of artistic perfection, courtesy of the Empire."

In response to the Emperor's new initiative, sources say the Rebel Alliance has put out a call to all artists to create their greatest Rebellion masterpiece and submit it for selection.

An unnamed spokesman for the Rebel Alliance had this to say:
"Despite their best attempts to quell the uprising, we will not stand for the continued trampling of our rights and freedoms as citizens. We expect hundreds of submissions and will be excited to pick the painting that best represents the ongoing efforts of our rebellion."

The Corellian Captives

TOP STORY

TYRENA, Corellia /Corellia News Service/ CorSec: For Immediate Press
galaxy wide Holonet release

The local police enforcement agency of Corellia issued a planet-wide warning today. The warning was issued due to what Major Alana Walden of the CorSec security division described as, "Numerous cases of missing persons". According to Major Walden, the number of missing person cases has increased by over 500% in the last month.

When asked if CorSec had any leads as to the cause of this situation, Major Walden presented Corellia News Service with the files on two Corellian citizens, Bandor Mokka, a male Bothan from Kor Vella and Faye Patrick a female Zabrak from Coronet.

"Both have been recently reported to be in the area of Tyrena and are to be considered armed and extremely dangerous" said Major Walden "If either of the suspects is encountered, do not attempt to apprehend them. You should immediately report their location to the nearest CorSec Officer."

TOP STORY

NASHAL, Talus /Corellia News Service/CorSec: For Immediate Press galaxy
wide Holonet release

The local police enforcement agency for the Corellian cluster issued a travel warning for the city of Nashal, Talus.

According to the Director of Cluster World Relations, Marx Grocco, "Certain indigenous tribal cultures" have been very active in what has been dubbed, "anti-human demonstrations."

While no reports of violence have been filed with CorSec on the anti-human demonstrators, the Director has issued a warning as a pre-emptive measure so that human citizens of the Corellian cluster can prepare for any possible hostile encounters with non-human protestors.

In an interview yesterday, Director Grocco stated, "We have no desire to cause undue panic or stress to the human citizens of Talus. This measure is meant only to insure the public safety of human travelers coming to Talus for the duration of these antihuman demonstrations."

When asked to clarify his statement, the Director replied "We suspect that a certain fringe element of the clusterworlds population is seeking to exploit the Selonian people of Talus for their own personal gain. During the duration of these demonstrations, CorSec will be stepping up all investigations into any unlicensed dealings with the tribal population of Talus."

The Corellia News Service has attempted to contact Selonian tribal leaders to get them to comment on their demonstrations, but so far those requests have only been met with silence.

Creatures of Mustafar

Galactic Biological Survey Project - Mustafar *Expedition Summary Report, log file 192-022c*

After my experiences on Kashyyyk in the Ryatt Trail (*See Expedition Summary Report, log file 189-035a*) I took an extended rest. It took me a while to get over the loss of some of my key team members.

However with the information we gathered we were able to use it to aid many people in avoiding such hardships themselves. For this expedition we were lucky enough to get permission, somewhat reluctantly, from the Empire. Surprisingly, they also dispatched a small squad of troopers for protection. I will be the first to admit that my previous mission has made me able to set

aside my personal reservations in the name of research. Now on with the report!

The first creature we managed to catalogue was the Tulrus. It is a large spiked omnivore from the northeastern regions of Mustafar (often found in the Tulrus nesting grounds). The rumors of their ill tempered disposition seemed to be true as the one we found was trying to stomp a beacon of some sort for no apparent reason.

Next we encountered a lone Blistmok which from previous research is abnormal; they usually are in packs of up to 10. They are quite intelligent predators and this one proved no exception. It did not wait around long enough for us to examine it further but quickly sped off through the debris. From our observations they seem to prefer the Burning planes and the Smoking Forest.

The Xandank is a particularly interesting creature. It has a frame similar to many feline species of other planets but is covered entirely by a thick protective shell, which is why it's often called the Crustacean Cat. It hunts in small packs as you can see from the data shot, and like other felines it stalks its prey before striking from ambush. These were observed in the area known as Berken's Flow.

Another creature of interest in this region is the Tanray, it is an extremely fast and agile predatory lizard. It has massive hind legs that facilitate leaping quickly over the burning rocks of Mustafar. We did encounter a few of these creatures elsewhere but for the most part they remained in Berken's Flow.

While conducting our research in central Mustafar we encountered several Jundak's. These creatures were quite aggressive. From the remains of one that we had to destroy, we could easily deduct that they would ingest pretty much anything. There were several half digested parts of organisms including a skull of a Zabrak. We decided it would be good to move along and it seemed like they were not very prevalent outside the central regions.

The Kubaza Beetle is a vicious hive minded insect. They can be found all over the planet and survive on the rich minerals and ores that the lava brings to the surface. As one of our skilled troopers found out, they do sometimes explode when killed due to this. Fortunately he only lost an arm, the injuries could have been much worse.

One of the more docile species we came across was the Lava Flea. They are fairly intelligent and make very good mounts. The Mustafarians have used them for countless years to traverse the lava regions since they are able to do so without harm. They originate mainly from southern Mustafar, but we have been told that there is an aggressive breed that can be found in the Crystal Flats.

The last creature I am going to report on for now will be the Sher Kar. It seems as if me and my biological expeditions always end in some sort of disaster and this one was no exception. The Sher Kar, similar in construction to a scorpion found on many worlds, is enormous. Most creatures including sentient beings, avoid contact with them since they are very aggressive. The lair we found was as we were heading back to our ship near the Tulrus in the northeast region. We saw some remains of a few Tulrus and were investigating and since we were unfamiliar with the Sher Kar, did not know it was a lair. Upon entering we were detected and attacked. Fortunately, unlike the last expedition we were able to get away, but at the expense of the wild life. I will have to think ahead more next time to try to avoid this type of error.

This concludes my preliminary report and a more detailed DNA scan, as well as images will be uploaded after more study.

A Hunters Maps

"Finally...I'm free of Sordaan". The Rodian who struggled his way through earning a reputation as a skilled hunter had earned his freedom; freedom from having to serve as a safari guide for his harsh hunt-master Sordaan Xris. The hunter had served his time with the Sordaan Xris' Safari Partners on Kashyyyk to earn honor for his family name.

"But what will you do now? How will you earn your way outside of Sordaan's reach?" his humble hunting partner had asked.

"I've been planning this for some time my friend. I have learned much from the many great off-world hunters who have been coming to Kashyyyk. Many great hunters from planets throughout the galaxy have shared their hunting stories with me and I have kept notes. For each of their great stories, I have mapped

out what they hunted and where. I have learned how these hunters have prospered throughout the galaxy and now I will prosper."

The two friends shared good times and dreams of a better tomorrow as their shuttle worked its way back to the core worlds.

"Here, let me show you my maps."

Freedom Station

-- On patrol in the Bright Jewel Systems Cluster, near the planet Ord Mantell --

An R-4 droid started making its standard bleeps and whirrs, attracting the attention of the pilot.

"What is it R-4?" Major Dalgas said as the droid continued expressing itself noisily.

"Ok, open the communications channel," he said with a sigh. He always dreaded when the commander contacted him off-world. It almost always meant that something was going to ruin his day.

"Major Dalgas, I'm glad I was able to get a hold of you before you jumped. We need you to head to a new assignment in the outer rim. I will give you the jump coordinates and you will be briefed once you arrive," the voice said over the com.

The Major tried to interject, "But I was just heading to the Kessel system..."

The commander promptly cut him off, "--All previous orders are irrelevant. It's urgent that you get to your destination as soon as possible."

"All Right, I'm on my way," he said grumbling under his voice.

"Command out!" and with a click the communication ended. Major Dalgas told his astro droid to lay in a course and prepare to jump. Seconds later they were on their way to Deep Space, a region of the Outer rim with few star systems and even fewer places to have a drink.

Upon exiting hyperspace, he headed to the coordinates given. In the distance he could see a Rebel Alliance Space Station. As soon as he got within range, he was promptly asked for codes and clearances. While waiting for the green light, he took the opportunity to do a fly around of the station. It was not a new station, but he could tell it had recently been retrofitted. There were parts that had new armoring which contrasted sharply to the worn, older sections. After what seemed like ages, he was cleared to land.

Upon landing, he was greeted by a Rebel Officer in a Commander's Uniform.

"Welcome to Freedom Station Major. Please come this way."

They walked down several hallways and took a lift a few levels up. When they exited the last lift, they entered what appeared to be a command center. There were several holo-displays as well as various computer banks and terminals around the perimeter of the room. They approached a General standing in front of one of the terminals.

"Sir! This is Major Dalgas." They saluted each other.

"Welcome to Freedom Station. I am General Rueb." Major Dalagas Saluted her.

"It's a pleasure to be aboard, Sir! This is quite a station you have here."

"Thank you. Freedom station has just recently been re-commissioned after a long downtime due to some serious battle damage. It's good to have new faces around here. As you will find out, most of the crew is new, but few of them are pilots. You are only the 2nd one to arrive. We were told that we should have enough for a full squad within two days. Hopefully, that will be soon enough," she said.

The General took a few steps over to a holo display of the sector. She motioned for Major Dalgas to join her. "This section of space is part of an important travel route for the Empire. This station serves as a launching point for us to intercept and in some cases, disrupt and destroy any Imperial traffic that we can. The station has been out of commission for many months due to a bad battle with the Empire. They failed to destroy the station, but they did disable us. It has taken all this time to refit it for use again. Your role will be leading a wing of our interception force." She paused a moment and then

continued, "We also have word that there is a new Star Destroyer heading this way. It will arrive in our system very soon so we need to be prepared. I'm glad you are here, but I sure hope you are ready for action. You will be getting plenty of it!"

With a smile on his face, Major Dalgas saluted and replied. "Yes Sir! I've always wanted to have a chunk of star destroyer for my trophy collection!"

"Don't get too cocky, but your enthusiasm is welcome and I look forward to your success. You are dismissed. Enjoy your free time now. There won't be much left soon enough." She returned his salute and smiled as he left the command center. "They all start so energetic," she said with a sigh. "Maybe this one will make a difference."

Forces Under Siege

Receiving Coded Transmission

Imperial Naval Communiqué #31756

To: Fleet High Command and Sr. Officers

From: Ysanne Isard, Director of Imperial Intelligence

Imperial counterintelligence agents embedded with a Rebel Bothan spy network intercepted the following Alliance transmission. Our field agents have noticed heightened Rebel activity in certain sectors, and it appears as though we have uncovered the cause:

Following the recent situation on Dathomir, and additional rumors of Imperial atrocities, it is imperative that we take extreme measures to expand our intelligence gathering networks and secure vital communications routes. I am calling on all fleet commanders to rally ships and available ground forces to three critical strategic points across the galaxy:

Tatooine – city of Bestine: The capital of Tatooine is rife with corruption and political turmoil, and is also a key Imperial outpost. If we take and hold this city we will control a wealth of information that moves through the galactic underworld.

Talus – city of Dearic: Another capital city plagued by dirty politics and scandal, Dearic is also home to a diverse and bustling Starport. Control of this city provides a broad spectrum of intelligence that will span the entire galaxy.

Naboo – city of Keren: As the Emperor's home world, Naboo is the beating heart of the Empire. To establish a control point on this planet would not only supply access to crucial intelligence, but would also be a devastating blow to Imperial morale and the Emperor himself. With its high level of commerce and financial influence throughout the Naboo system, Keren is the perfect target for this operation. This mission takes top priority. The Empire must not be allowed to hold these cities. Good luck, and May the Force Be With You!
-- Leia Organa

Imperial Intelligence has confirmed the authenticity of this transmission. Squadrons will be assigned to deliver ground invasion forces to each of these locations to take and secure the cities. Under no circumstance can we allow these Rebel scum to gain a foothold. Be advised that Lord Vader himself has taken a personal interest in this matter, and failure will not be tolerated.

Transmission End

Genetic Potential

"Doctor!" the lieutenant said with a salute "We need to take off shortly, is there anything else you need us to secure?"

"Yes" Doctor Vigh said as he glanced at the data-pad "Make sure that this last crate is onboard and secured, then you can take off. We need to get these specimens to the Imperial research facility on Nubia without delay!"

"Yes Sir! Right away Sir!" the lieutenant said and went back to work.

Doctor Vigh was the chief scientist of the GeneTech Syndicate, a freelance research and development team that specialized in radical, and often dangerous, biological projects.

A thin man dressed in typical research gear and holding a data-pad approached Doctor Vigh.

"Doctor, we have loaded all the adolescents. They seem to be sufficiently hibernated for the journey, but shouldn't we have used carbon-freezing instead? It would have been much more secure."

"No, absolutely not!" Doctor Vigh said "Carbon freezing could jeopardize the future evolution and DNA stability."

"As you wish" said the scientist with a sigh "I'll go get ready for departure." He jumped into the transport ship and Doctor Vigh headed back inside the complex.

The ship was nearly ready for takeoff, but since its mission was critical, the staff was making a thorough check of all the containment and restraining systems. Inside the cargo hold, the inspector tugged on the bindings to ensure that the last crate was secure. He checked off the list and confirmed that everything was ready for transport. Putting the data-pad under his arm, he walked to the door where the guard was stationed and motioned for it to be secured and the containment field activated.

The lights in the cargo bay switched to a dim red in preparation for takeoff. The ship vibrated as the engines came to life, and the rumble could be felt across the compartment. This caused a small shift in the weight of the crates as something inside was startled. A restraining bolt on the backmost crate broke free-- allowing the side of the crate to fall open. Quickly, something scurried out into the shadowy recesses of the cargo bay.

Over the intercom the captain's voice could be heard... "Commencing liftoff. Everyone secure yourself."

The engines vibrated more as the ship started to take off. Once again the captain's voice came over the intercom...

"Elaine, check the transfer rate in the power couplings, it sounds a little off."

"Right away, captain!" she replied and headed back towards the engine compartment. "Sir, there is something sticky back here...."

Seconds later, there was a loud explosion that reverberated across the ship.

"We're losing altitude fast!" cried the captain on the intercom "Everyone get secured and in crash positions. Engineering, activate the auto suppression system.... hold on, we're going down!"

Shortly after, the ship crashed into a ravine several kilometers from Nashal.

When the emergency lighting came on, the captain had the crew members that were able to do so remove the injured. There were a few casualties, but it seemed restricted to those in the engine compartment. While the crew was moving the scientist and others that were injured away from the crash, the containment alarm went off.

"Get everyone off the ship!" the captain hollered.

Three guards acknowledged him and ran onboard the ship. Several minutes later, two of the men came off with three injured crew. "Where is the other?" the captain asked.

"Sir, the arachne got out...he didn't make it. The containment field is totally gone and most of them have broken free."

The scientist that the lieutenant was aiding looked up at the captain. "Captain, we need to get back in there and stop the Arachne from escaping. If they get out there is no telling what repercussions there could be."

"Ok Lieutenant, gather up the rest of the survivors and have them prepare to head back to Nashal. I'll take some of the uninjured and see if we can take care of this mess!" The captain un-holstered his blaster and motioned for the other guard and one crewman to follow him back into the wreckage.

After the lieutenant gathered up the others and explained the situation, they started to pack up for the long trek back to Nashal.....

All of a sudden, screams and blaster fire could be heard coming from inside the ship! Instinctively, the lieutenant quickly got the rest of the survivors moving. Their only option was to get to Nashal as fast as possible.

As the survivors rushed off to Nashal, there was activity at the crash site.

Slowly, spindly-pointed legs protruded from the doorway, pausing as if monitoring their situation. With a sense of purpose, the Arachne started creeping away from the wreckage....

Imperial Entanglements

Ex, what did you just do?

The Imperial Sandtrooper's corpse lay in the dust in front of the starport. Pilots, travelers and merchants went on about their business, walking by the slain Imperial soldier without a second thought. A second thought would certainly earn them the attention of the Imperial authorities who were most certainly on their way to investigate the incident.

Ex was a popular nightclub entertainer. Well known and well liked by all the locals. Her life on Tatooine had been modest, but happy. That was all about to change.

"I'm sorry honey. I had to do it. He's been in the cantina every night harassing me. The dirty nerfherder has been chasing my customers away, pressuring me for information about some Rebel underground safe house in Anchorhead and last night, he showed up at my house with 5 troopers from his squad and they RUINED EVERYTHING I OWN! I DON'T EVEN KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT REBELS IN ANCHORHEAD!"

Full of anger, Ex screamed and blasted the corpse again.

"We gotta get you outta here...now!" Pulling on her friend's arm, Sh'ira dragged Ex away from the starport. Stricken with rage, Ex didn't plan on shooting an Imperial Stormtrooper in broad daylight in front of a busy starport, but the reality of what was probably going to happen startled her.

"Oh, no, Sh'ira, what am I going to do? I was just so angry. He ruined everything I owned. He knows I don't really know anything. He just wanted to bully me into a date. I can tell the local authorities that right? They'll believe me, won't they?"

"Ex, snap out of it! You *know* they won't. The Mos Eisley police aren't going to help you. You don't have any money or have any connections. Once the Empire shows up and "asks for their cooperation", they'll arrest anyone and everyone with purple hair on this planet."

The stark reality of facing the consequences of her actions had really pushed Ex into a state of denial. Sh'ira had to snap her out of it. Desperately tugging on her friend's arm, Ex wasn't coming around as fast as she ought to. Like a child who didn't want to return home to angry parents, Sh'ira dragged her friend along behind her.

"I can go see an Image Designer..."

"No you can't. Anyone who helps you will be in danger and you won't do that. Just pick up your feet Ex and let's get off the street! C'mon, a sandstorm is kicking up. This is good luck for us!"

"Good luck?! Now you're the one who's losing it! We won't be able to see a thing!"

"We'll be fine." A smile filled her face. Back on Sullust , perfect direction sense and a photographic memory were abilities everyone had. Remembering the streets of Mos Eisley was so easy it was second nature. "Close your eyes so you don't get hurt."

They both closed their eyes and Sh'ira led them through the streets as if it was broad daylight. The sandstorm was a perfect cover for their escape.

Back at Sh'ira's humble home, she started making plans, "We have to get off this planet. You're not safe and it won't be long before someone tells the Imperials that I helped you away from the scene."

"Yeah, I supposed there aren't too many white Sullustans running around Mos Eisley. Sh'ira, I'm so sorry to get you into this."

"It's ok, you didn't get me into this. I just couldn't let you stand there long enough to get caught."

"So what are we going to do?"

Ex's word's echoed in her head, "Well, we're going to have to get some credits and hire a privateer to get us off the planet."

"Can you do that?" Ex asked hopefully.

Sh'ira replied honestly, "I don't know...yet."

Both of them had fallen asleep during the sandstorm. It was early the next morning and she woke up long before her friend. Leaving quietly, Sh'ira hit the streets to seek out her usual contacts. The only person she knew that could legitimately and secretly get them off the planet was Dravis. He was a privateer who made a living off of convincing young and naïve pilots to smuggle goods off the planet.

"Dravis, can you help me? I need a transport to Corellia."

Dravis was always difficult. Nothing happened in Mos Eisley without him knowing about it and if you went to Dravis for help, it came with a hefty price tag. She hoped he hadn't heard about the shooting yet.

"Look sweetheart, the Imperials aren't on to you yet. You're lucky for that, but if you want my help, it's going to cost you."

"How did you know?" Sh'ira was a bit shocked that word traveled so fast.

Dravis laughed, "How many Sullustans do you think are running around Tatooine? There are lots of purple haired entertainers, but only one short, white female denizen from Sullust. You should have known better than to help her. It's gonna cost you at least hundred thousand credits. Two hundred if you ask me tomorrow."

"A hundred thousand!" She stopped herself from trying to haggle before he raised the price. Without saying a word to him, she snuck out of the backdoor imagining the pleasure of slapping the smarmy grin off of his face.

From one close call to another, the Imperial Troopers were on their trail. Even when she left the cantina, they were arresting a Rodian who had been seen at the starport when the shooting happened.

It was back to slums of Mos Eisley to look for an opportunity. Surely she could get some kind of work. She was right; no one knew his name, but everyone knew where to find him. He was an Aqualish "businessman" that hung around in the slums. He was a handler and business was good on the wrong side of town. When life is tough, there is always someone desperate enough to do the dirty jobs no one else will.

She hated doing business with him, but he was the only handler that could offer her a big payout.

His offer came in grunts and growls, "You have fixing skills. If you get the information I want, I'll give you 80,000 credits."

Sh'ira tried desperately to raise all the money she needed with one job, "I want 100,000 credits or it's no deal!"

"No. Do the job for 80,000 or no deal. It's my final offer and you make me another offer, you can't have the job."

"I'll do it." 80,000 was almost everything they needed to get off the planet. She couldn't pass this up.

"Good. As soon as you return, I'll give you a decryptor."

The job wasn't really that hard. Sneaking into the city hall and getting a copy of the shipping schedules was easy enough. Now she'd have to find someone good enough for the last 20,000 credits. In between stealing official shipping schedules and trying to find another source of quick credits, she made a quick stop to her house to check on Ex.

Ex panicked when she found how much money it was going to take to get them off the planet, "How are we going to get that kind of money? What are we going to do?"

"It's ok. I've already lined up most of the money. I just need to find a way to get the last 20,000 credits."

"Hey, I know a Junk Dealer that pays good prices. Can you lay your hands on some goods to sell?"

Sh'ira smiled, "Sure I can. Most of the folks coming into the city are carrying the latest line of stims. I can get some of those, will that do?"

There was a knock on the door.

No one ever visited Sh'ira. The pair of them knew something was wrong. Whispering, they planned their hasty escape, "Quick, out the back door. There is an alley we can sneak through."

Before the second knock of an armored glove fell on the steel Tatooine door, they were out the back alley and working on borrowed time to make enough money for passage to Corellia.

Traveling to Mos Espa, they hunted, swindled and stole Fitness stims, Dexterity stims and all of the latest modern medical conveniences they could find. With two crates full, Sh'ira made her way back to Mos Eisley and through the back streets that she knew so well.

The Junk Dealer was a Zabrack. Simple enough to find and she'd buy all the stims anyone could provide.

"So do you have them?"

"I do. I was able to get two crates of them."

"Great, that'll cover what I need. I'll give you 24,000 credits. Here you go. Paid in full."

Sh'ira was elated. That was enough to get them passage to Corellia and still have some money left over to get started on a new life.

Suddenly, the Junk Dealer stopped talking to her, panicked and then spoke loudly and alarmed, "What?!? This is stolen! How dare you try to sell me this!? Thief! Thief! Give me my money back!"

Looking around, she saw a detachment of Stormtroopers coming for them!

Sh'ira darted into an alley, trying to escape the patrol.

"There she is! Get her!" They were the last words she ever wanted to hear.

The alley was a dead end! She was no match for the stormtroopers. Luckily, she had one fitness stim left over that she kept for herself. She jabbed it into her arm, gripped a charmed trinket and pulled out her chrome plated DL-44. Charging the Stormtroopers, she fired a panic shot into the alley to throw them off guard. Darting passed them in the confusion, she made her way through the alleys and around the outside of the city to make her escape. When everything was clear, she doubled back to the starport to meet Dravis and Ex.

He was as charming as ever.

"So do you have all of my money?"

Without saying a word, she handed over all hundred thousand credits. They boarded Dravis's Krayt and their troubles were behind them in a hyperspace jump. She didn't say another word until they made it to Corellia.

Ex finally broke the silence once they were on Corellia, "So what are we going to do?"

Sh'ira was sad, but truthful, "I'm sorry, but we can't do this together. We can lose ourselves in Coronet, but if we stay together, we'll be recognized and they'll catch us. I just can't take a chance of ending up in the Imperial Prison on Dathomir again. You can blend in, but I can't. You'll be safer on your own."

Knowing her friend was right, she tried to look at the bright side of things, "Sh'ira, look. This will all blow over in a couple of weeks and we'll be fine. You'll see. You get outta here - - make your way to Tyrena or Kor Vella and catch another transport. Stay ahead of them for a few days and they won't find you."

They smiled as best they could and parted ways, hoping it wasn't the kind of goodbyes that friends share with each other when they aren't really going to see each other again.

Coronet was a big city. Maybe she could get decent work. Maybe the Empire didn't really think they were that important. She could lay low, blend in and who knows, maybe this was the place to get a fresh start on things.

The sun was shining, she had managed to cautiously walk past a few Stormtroopers on patrol and they didn't even pay attention to her.

Sure. Everything would be fine.

Everything looked like it would be ok when she caught the familiar click of a Stormtrooper's helmet comlink. A detachment officer's voice could be heard as he relayed information to the regional command center, "This is TK-488 reporting in. We've got another one. Our contact from Tatooine has some information on the recent murder in Mos Eisley. No sir, we've confirmed the identification of the fugitives. Yes, Dravis insists on his usual fee...."

It's Not My War!

Why should it matter that we supply armor to both sides? They don't know ... they both think that they have an exclusive deal with us, riiiiight! *We're the Black Sun.*

They are so concerned with each other that it's allowing us to be a little more flexible than normal. With the recent advances we've made at the Death Watch installation working on our Mandalorian technology, we've been able to create two new series of armor .

Conveniently, as these things happen; we've made one for the Rebel Alliance and one for the Empire. Of course, we took precautions... so that each wouldn't know what we're developing for the other side. We also made sure the armors were different enough so that battlefield inspections won't reveal their origins. After all, we wouldn't want to sacrifice the sudden freedom we have... while they 're off fighting their war.

Ok, so enough of my rambling. You're more interested in armor details.... just like any business man, so I'll give it to you straight.

Since we are charging the Rebellion and the Empire the same amount for the armor, they are statistically alike. From what our sources were able to gather, they are using the same type of distribution system. It's a form of commendation program -- you get these by blasting members of the other side or by doing missions.

Now, you were never here, and I didn't say this... but I heard that if you want to acquire the most commendations, just get one of those "deal with the General" type missions.

Ok, that should be sufficient information to wet your pallet. Now, what about my fee? What? That's it?

blaster fire goes off

Always a pleasure doing business with you ...

Jump to Lightspeed

Alliance Pilot Veizu T'ah

Pilot's Log: 0524 Standard Time

Somewhere in the Corellia system...

Captain Kreezo needs to be more conscious of what's going on here. He's a great flight instructor, and a dedicated Alliance soldier... but I fear that he is being set up for failure (or worse). If things continue to decline here in Corellia space, my mentor Kreezo could end up in front of a firing squad.

Why? Well, we cleared transport routes all day yesterday, bringing down swarms of TIE fighters in preparation to move a convoy of civilian refugees. Now we find out that all of our work was for nothing!

Somehow, the Imperials knew exactly where to find our transports, and they have sacked the convoy with a huge wing of TIE interceptors. The fighter escort never knew what hit them. The freighters that weren't destroyed out-right ran into nebulae for safety.

How did the Empire know about this? Kreezo won't comment... but I think there is a spy. Maybe even someone in our flight group. Someone who knew all the details about our convoy, our patrol routes. Someone... but who?

No time to figure that out. At the moment, I begin 'search and rescue' duty. My job is to patrol the Corellian nebulae, locate each of our transports and escort them to safety... every single one, without fail!

No doubt the Empire is patrolling the region, ready to pounce on our civilian friends at first sighting. Maybe if the Force is with me, I'll tangle with that traitor and put an end to his treachery!

At this point, I lack only a tiny bit of experience to qualify for Kreezo's final lesson: Intermediate Alliance Pilot Procedures. The elder pilots tell me this skill represents the first batch of secret Rebel starfighter techniques. Stuff they don't teach to just anyone; this is the stuff that they reserve for career-types like myself.

Seems like just yesterday Captain Kreezo certified me to fly my first starship. We campaigned throughout Corellian space to ensure safety for our transports, establish strategic listening posts and secret staging areas for Alliance fighters. Along the way, Kreezo has trained me to handle military-grade ordnance, and has certified me to use my personal astromech (R4-K2) aboard my starship.

Soon, I will have learned everything that he has to teach me. And, for the sake of the Alliance, we will part ways. Not sure where I'm headed. Likely Dantooine. Kreezo has discussed a secret organization that has aided the Alliance since the start of this conflict... a group that is now in desperate need of fighter pilots...

(End Pilot's Log)

*Pilot Initiate *name withheld**

Pilot's Log: 0667 Standard Time

The Imperial Retreat on Tatooine

Master, As you commanded, I have walked the ranks to observe my fellow Pilot Initiates. They are all such young, unready peasants. They bow their heads in fear as I pass. If I gaze into their trembling eyes, they draw frightened smiles across their faces. I say nothing. I pity them. So weak. So distant. So ignorant of the Emperor's will.

But soon... soon they will know...

Your wisdom is endless, my Master. To serve this Imperial Navy brings honor to my name. It brings me closer to the Emperor, and weaves me into his grand

design for the galaxy. This thought eases the intense difficulty of taking orders from poor Lieutenant Colzet.

While I despise Colzet and his weak-minded officers, my training has not been a complete waste of time. I have learned how to make use of several of the Navy's more deadly starships, as well as manage complex prototype weapon systems. Just as you taught me to use the secret arts of Teras Kasi, I have learned to do the same with ship and cannon.

I have arranged for one final duty to fulfill my agreement with the Imperial Navy. Lieutenant Colzet has word from high command that Alliance freighters are attempting to smuggle illegal weapons through the Outer Rim. This is another grave error in Rebel judgment, for I will sniff them out, rupture their engines and punish them all in a fitting manner.

These Rebel aliens amuse me so. So desperate. Reminds me of our exploits on planet Dathomir, my Lord. How they must fear you still...

My new mastery of space combat has not gone unnoticed. Several organizations have deemed me worthy to join their ranks. The Imperial Inquisition has sent agents to research my background and a special operations team called the Storm Squadron has requested a formal military transfer.

Of particular interest are overtures from a group called Black Epsilon. Their agents speak honeyed words of power and domination. They say they do the Emperor's Will by direct decree. That he has foreseen my own ascendance!

I feel a stirring within the force. In my mind it is a black wave encircling the enemies of the Empire. Whatever the path I take, I see this wave at its end. This is my destiny.

I will report further details at another time, master. I must meditate on these things...

Keeping The Peace

The incessant shouting in the street could be faintly heard through the closed door. "Day in and day out!" groused Escara. "I almost prefer getting beat up by thugs than listening to this racket all day."

Escara Frei had been a resident of Mos Eisley for years, and although the town wasn't exactly friendly, never had the clamor in the alleys been so relentless.

Escara's home was located close to the city's starport. Galaxy gossip had always condemned the Mos Eisley cantina as the most raucous part of town, but Escara was starting to believe that the real troublemakers gathered outside of the starport.

She marched outside and glared down the street at the loud noise. "That's it," she declared, "I'm going to the mayor. He better do something about those ruffians."

Escara had taken two steps inside city hall when she heard the mayor's wary voice. "Let me guess," said Mikdanyell Guh'rannt. "Noise complaint?"

Escara opened her mouth to launch into a tirade, but the Rodian put up a hand to stop her. "We have a plan."

The mayor was proud of his city, despite its reputation. Anyone who chatted with the mayor knew that his favorite description of Mos Eisley was "center of economic growth." Faced with growing complaints, and fearful that the reputable businesses left would pack up because of the racket, Mikdanyell had put a plan into motion.

"I've already spoken with Queen Kylantha in Theed, and the regional governors for each planet," he began. "It turns out that the commotion isn't just limited to Mos Eisley. We've all agreed to work together to combat this menace. These pests have been spreading across the galaxy to peddle their shady wares, and no one wants them around. They're a very organized group that has managed to use their numbers to evade the law. Until now."

The mayor held up a datapad. "This is a list of concerned citizens, like yourself, who have volunteered to be keepers of the peace. Unlike local police officers, these Wardens are free to roam the entire galaxy to weed out these lawbreakers. The Wardens are charged with keeping the peace and silencing the noise until law enforcement can take care of the troublemakers themselves. And trust me... there will be no mercy."

"How soon can they get to work?" Escara asked eagerly.

"It should be a matter of weeks, if not days," Mikdanyell estimated. "There are quite a few Wardens to get organized and deputized before work can begin. And we'll be looking to bring in more."

Legacy Quest

Part 1 – Undercover In Mos Eisley

"You want me to do what?!" I acted shocked and played into his ruse for more information. The outlaw scum Bib Fortuna was trying to put pressure on me to do his dirty work. I grudgingly obliged and he fell for my act. My Imperial training served me well.

How strange this glorious accident was! I was deep undercover, trying to locate the coordinates of a rebel base. We were in a cantina on Corellia where the rebels believe they are safe. Their pitiful belief in that stronghold helped me work my way into their confidence. Also, as much as I despised it, I had been genetically altered by Imperial scientists to look like a Twilek (I despised looking like an alien). My semi-permanent disguise also helped my subterfuge.

We had been drinking Corellian ale and my plan was to loosen their tongues with excessive libation, except the Wookiee they had with them drank me under the table. Even my stress training couldn't prepare me for that. I was out cold and the next thing I remember, I woke up aboard Tansarii Point Station. We had been using that station to warehouse captured hopefuls for a top secret project that even I didn't have clearance for.

I was about to break my cover and return to command when none other than Han Solo helped me "escape". It was a golden opportunity to get close to this most prized outlaw and learn his secrets! If I could learn more about his operations and contacts, I could bring him down and Vader himself would be pleased. I would surely be promoted! This was a wonderful stroke of luck and I was going to play it out.

I managed to tag the infamous Millennium Falcon with a tracking device. The range of the tracker was short. It wasn't as powerful as I would have liked it to be, but since I was getting close to his contacts, I could track him down. After

earning Solo's confidence at Tansarii Point Station, he was happy to drop me off on Tatooine and the fool even helped me make one of his contacts.

His name was Pall. He thought I was Solo's friend, so he helped me get a speeder once I was down on the planet. I had never been on Tatooine before, but that was on purpose. It's a wretched place and the Stormtroopers generally strong-arm the outlaws and villains. It's not usually a place for a spy who's game is subterfuge and finesse. The only real trouble I had at first were the Tusken Raiders in Junktown. Filthy things they are; I wish the Empire would move in destroyers and orbital strike the place into glass.

Then it all started falling into place. These small-minded criminals were all too eager to bring me into the fold. I met him in the shadows just outside the starport in Mos Eisley. His name was Vourk and he was obviously a shrewd street contact, but not shrewd enough. He put me in touch with Bib and once he thought I could be played like another one of his patsies, it just got easier and easier.

The next part of my investigation uncovered something that I know the regional governor will be pleased to find out. The mayor of Mos Eisley was the first person Bib sent me to and it was more than enough evidence to throw him into the Imperial prison on Dathomir. I know that beyond this simple job, Mayor Mikdanyell Guh'Rantt must be working with these criminals. Everyone here does it and now that I had evidence of the connection, his time would run out as soon as this mission was over. Enough gloating though, it was time to work these contacts for information.

Mayor Guh'Rantt (a filthy Rodian), put me to work right away. He had contracted out some simple jobs. Work for dunces that these criminals could farm out to the lost travelers outside the starport. (I'll be glad when my report brings down the wrath of the Empire on these petty thieves).

My first contact was just what you would expect from these thugs. His name was Purvis Arrison.

An ex-military man, unkempt and a disgrace to whatever army he was kicked out of. He was waging a personal war against the Tusken in Junktown. It was easy enough with my Imperial training. Simple reckon and attack. I was actually

thinking this was going to be a dead end when Bib came over my comlink, "Are you still doing tasks for the Mayor?!" he belched at me with his disgusting voice. "Jabba's becoming impatient!" I put up with his insults because I hoped this would payoff and I could bring in Solo and all of his criminal companions. Bib pushed me to finish the Mayor's dirty work and then move on to my next contact.

Peawp R'Dawc was her name; another criminal working for the mayor under the guise of being a contract worker "helping out the city". The mayor had been running on about the Rodians and their "rich history" (as if aliens had such a thing) when he put me in touch with her. She was a Zabrak enforcer who needed help mopping up thugs from Mos Eisley. This was another one of their lies. Every citizen knows that there is no end of thugs in Mos Eisley and she was most likely having me take out her criminal competition. To her, I was just another criminal in the city that she believed she was duping into her dirty work. To me, I was an Imperial spy working my way up the top to the big prize and then I'd bring them all down.

At first it was water thieves, thugs and hoodlums; nothing serious. This whole thing was a waste of my time except for the fact that I had a real clue to chasing down Solo and maybe even shut down part of Jabba's operations. More simple tasks for simple criminals, but then Bib contacted me again. It was another chance to get in his good graces and work my way up the chain. Jabba had arranged for a prison shuttle to be shot down and he didn't want there to be any survivors. Now this was the kind of dirty work I liked. These criminals probably came as rough as you could imagine and I was pleased that they might even be a slight challenge for my prowess. There were no survivors.

Finally, my chance came at another target. I'd worked hard doing menial tasks for lowlife scum for two days now and I finally got a break. Next, they sent to take out Vaigon Shinn's thugs for Jabba. It was a simple recovery mission to steal back stolen goods. Scum is scum and the bonus for me was I could do my job and serve the Empire without even breaking my cover. Maybe Tatooine wasn't so bad after all?

I tracked Shinn's thugs and followed them to their hideout. It wasn't really a hideout. They were simply squatting in an old Imperial forward base that no

one cared about any longer. With these kinds of disposable installations, sometimes they were havens to criminals, sometimes to rebels and sometimes just to refugees. The tracking part was easy. The Empire has homing beacons imbedded in them and all I had to do was set my sub-dermal tracker to the proper Imperial code and Shinn's hideout would be as easy to find as if it had a spotlight on it.

"Get him!" Shinn's thugs rallied against me. They shouldn't have seen me, but something broke my cover. No matter. The battle was fast and furious. This carbine I managed to lay my hands on was good enough to take out this hive. I fought my way down into the belly of the bunker and there he was! Vaigon Shinn!

The dog nearly took me out with a lucky shot, but fortune was in my favor! Not only did I take him out, but Bib was pleased. All this dirty work paid off. I finally did enough of Bib's lousy chores to make my next contact...Niko.

I'm coming for you Niko.

Part 2 – Jabba's Dirty Work

"No....you.....don't!" The Rill I had been hunting ran under my XP-38.

"You're not going to get away that easy!"

I grabbed the Rill's tail with both arms and dragged him out from under my speeder, falling back into the sand. The nasty beast turned and charged me with its rack of fangs running for my.... I rolled over in the dirt a couple of times to get out of its way to protect my future family lineage. Leaping up, I spun around and blasted the filthy beast.

"I've had just about enough of this." Doing Entha's dirty work was getting old. I needed get past her, take her out if I have to, and work my way up the criminal food chain. I could easily cover her "disappearance" with some well placed lies to the Mayor. It would be easy to dupe the mayor into taking her place if I thought it was worthwhile, but it wasn't.

It was Bib again. His wretched voice came over my comlink, "If we'd known it would take you this long to get things done, we would have just killed you. Speed things up for your own good!" If Fortuna knew he was making threats to an elite Imperial spy, the coward would be crawling up Jabba's backside for protection. As annoying as he was, it was a good sign. I was getting closer to Niko Brehe.

I finished up Entha's work and contacted Mayor Guh'Rantt. The Mayor called me on the comlink. I let him talk and listened for clues. Then he slipped, "By the way, I've received word from Vourk. He needs to speak with you right now."

I'll bet he does. Now I'm sure of the Mayor's connection to Jabba's criminal underworld and this was the last proof of his illegal involvement that I needed. I'll make my connection with Vourk and transmit this evidence to Regional Governor and by tomorrow, the Mayor will be in an Imperial Prison paying the price he so rightly deserves.

The twin suns of Tatooine had finally sunk below the horizon and night fell on Mos Eisley. I welcomed the cover of the night. I could work quickly and with deadly precision. This was going to be a busy night.

I had been hunting Niko Brehe hard and fast. I had pegged him for a big target. Early on in my investigation, I caught wind of this smuggler and his name had come across my desk when I was still working the office side of the spy game. Word was that he was one of Jabba's street bosses, but after Vourk hooked me up with Niko, I knew Niko was a small fish. I'll have to see if I can work him over for some information. Doing busy work for this elaborate network of Jabba's lackeys was getting old. I was caught a little off guard. Vourke pointed him out and Niko was standing almost right behind me. "Jabba says you're good muscle. Well I need a rival gang roughed up. Think you can handle that?" Niko was easy to sucker. Yeah, I can handle that and I can handle you too, fool. I acted like a street thug and he just acted slick and told me everything I needed to hear.

I had spotted them yesterday and knew right where they were. Taking out the swoop gang was too easy. These fringers can't handle a blaster as well as a

trained Imperial expert, though one got lucky. He trailed me as I headed back into the city and tried to shoot me in the back. He won't be doing that anymore.

It was easy work and Niko gave me a pretty nice weapon scope (I'll have to find out where he's getting them from). The Mayor, Peawp, Purvis, Entha, Vourk, Niko; this mission I have fallen into is turning out to be a hotbed of criminals.

I began to wonder what was going on. It seemed like everyone here was involved one way or another and I started to get concerned. "Should I even give this information to the Regional authorities?" With everything out in the open like this, I'm going to have to work my way to the top to see if there is an Imperial traitor involved in all of this.

Once I paid off Niko, things started speeding up finally. Dunir Signos was another contact that was easy to manipulate. He needed something delivered to a smuggler camp just outside of town. The delivery point was Toggi Bok, a Trandoshan. If I hit a dead end, I could make one transmission and have this scum singing like a Neimoidian songbird. I delivered Dunir's package and was about to make that transmission when I stumbled across my next big clue. The White Thranta shipping offices. I found the place pretty easily. It was nestled towards the top of a ridge, just outside Mos Eisley.

"Here's your package from White Thranta". Dunir had me bring the package to Reimos. Apparently none of these dirtbags actually does any of their own footwork.

"How's it going? Dunir says you do good work. No questions asked". I played into Reimos. I'm betting he works for White Thranta and he thinks I'm being used by Jabba. It's classic training to play both ends against the middle. I pushed the buttons he was wearing on his sleeve like an amateur.

"Well, there is one question, when I am I going to be square with Jabba?"

Reimos just about had a heart attack. "What?!? Sshhh! Listen, we don't want to talk about that right now. Let's just play the good Jabba's henchman role and we'll do what needs to be done when it's time. Until then, let's just be quiet about your contacts, understand?"

Yeah, I understand. Target acquired. Reimos nervous outburst and the troubled look on his face revealed to me that he was a spy himself working against Jabba. I calmed him down by acquiescing. Reimos continued, "Jabba is interested in some subordinates of his. He thinks they may not be as loyal as they profess".

"Dissention among the ranks? Is the whip not working anymore?" Ruse on top of ruse, my passive interrogation of Reimos worked like a charm.

"I don't know the details, but if the rumors are correct, this subordinate may be doing something terrible. I need you to introduce this surveillance virus into their network so I can look around in their data."

I bet you do. This was a great deep cover opportunity. I could get my Imperial surveillance viruses into their systems, extract evidence on everyone involved and never risk my cover. I could even blast my way out of this if things went wrong. I can get Jabba's records AND White Thrantas. The Empire will profit off of their petty squabbling.

I headed back out to the White Thrantas offices. It was easy enough to cozy up to the receptionist. She didn't even see me slip the virus into their computer. I just needed to buy some time while it worked its way through the system.

Just then, Bib chimed in again. They must have implanted a tracker in me while I was unconscious on Tansarii Point Station. I'll use that to my advantage for now and carve it out later. Apparently Jabba needed some supplies and Bib had me run a side mission.

My contact was Tori Radeen. She was hiding in what seemed to be an endless supply of back alleys in Mos Eisley and known among spies for supplying some of the deadliest poisons to the deadliest spies in the galaxy. She started briefing me.

"CULTISTS?"

Cultists disgust me. Every step I take on this downward spiral into Jabba's underworld makes me sick. It's proof that Empire has much work to do. We

need to eradicate this scum as fast as we can. I am the Emperor's right hand of justice in this backwater world. She sent me to track down cultists calling themselves the "Cult of the Krayt". It should be easy enough to get into the cave, but the Bone Gnashers? This could get ugly. I heard that they were a breed of arachne transplanted here from Endor. Nasty bugs these Bone Gnashers.

I found the cave and oddly enough, it looked like the gaping maw of a Krayt dragon. I was all too happy to wipe out the cultists. It was easy for me to move in the cave's shadows and eliminate them one by one. Searching for evidence, I kept finding clamps and organs on them. I hated to think what they were doing in this cave. I couldn't think about that now. I'll have a Stormtrooper detachment clean this place up tomorrow. I needed those Bone Gnasher glands if I was going to break this White Thranta ring.

Finding the Bone Gnashers wasn't as easy as I had expected. They were deep in the labyrinthine caves. Once of them even bit me, but I think it was a young one. Either that or the fangs didn't penetrate my skin. It was time to get out of this place.

Bib's untimely interruptions were getting on my nerves, "Heh heh, you were lucky to get through those cultists. Make sure you return those glands to Tori and then report back to Reimos."

Following their orders led me on a merry chase right where I wanted to be; back at the White Thranta offices just in time for my virus to completely penetrate their systems. Their pathetic in-fighting and stealing from each other is great cover. The fact that they are medical supplies is a bonus. The supplies were probably going to the rebellion and I could cut off this supply.

Getting in was easy. I'd stroll in like I belonged there. I had been there earlier in the day, so the guards didn't think twice. Getting passed the receptionist again with a little flirting was easy too, but after her, everything was an unknown. Reimos had given me a hard target: get into the offices and break into the medical system. It was a closed network and deep inside the smuggler's hideout.

I worked my way down to the lower levels of the complex. The elite guards weren't buying my cover so I had fight my way through. Two levels and a dozen guards later, I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to get out. This place was much bigger than it looked on the outside. Smearing Bio-Substantive Paste onto myself, I might be able to tough this out. A little bit of all purpose lubricating spray on my weapons for some extra speed and I just might be able to even the odds.

Good thing I had that gear, too.

I managed to get down to the next level. It was their main holding bay and it was guarded by an elite Black Sun mercenary whose reputation preceded him: Untas. I tried taking him out from behind, but I couldn't get to him fast enough. He positioned himself in the room like a seasoned pro. Before I knew it, he was all over me and some patrol guards had come up behind me. This might be the end of the line!

Quickly I threw a smoke bomb on the floor for some cover. I retreated behind some boxes and then ran back up the hallway. I needed breathing room. It was only a split second, but at least I was able to take out the security guards. I jammed a fortitude stim in me and whirled around. Untas was on me; it was do or die, right here and now.

One last trick in my book: Disposal. My weapon went off and Untas went down. That one was too close. I took cover behind the cargo crates to regain my strength. Lucky for me, he even had something worth stealing. I searched his armor and found a trinket. Who knows? Maybe it'll bring me some luck.

"Outstanding! The data has been destroyed. You have certainly earned your pay this time. Now all that is left is to take out the manager." Reimos was actually a sad and pathetic slicer. The virus he gave me was almost worthless. If I hadn't had my own software, this mission would have been a bust. I sneered as Reimos said the name of my next target over the comlink, "Dren Riddick".

Dren Riddick was the name of the White Thrantas shipping manager and the benefits of this undercover operation got sweeter and sweeter.

You see, Dren used to be an Imperial geneticist who turned traitor. I knew this because he was the one who altered my appearance from a respectable human into this filthy Twilek disguise. Now I could eliminate this betrayer and cripple anyone who was depending on his illegal disguise operations. "What's this?" The plot thickened. During all the fighting, it seems I picked up a clue I hadn't noticed it before. It was a letter reminding me I had something else I needed to take care of. I couldn't afford to do this now. I needed to focus on my mission.

"DREN!" He recognized my voice. Perfect pitch was one of Dren's other unique skills. Following the security guards down to their barracks was standard procedure. Not only did I find all the systems I needed to slice into, but Dren was there. It was quick and short. He was a thief and a medical butcher, not a warrior. He struggled against me in a pathetic attempt to protect himself, but at least he tried. A personal computer terminal was near his bunk. "A-HA!" It seems old Dren is the fool I knew him to be. He was being used as a front man for this operation. The real puppeteer here at White Thranta was Brok Ziamzun! I doubled back into the main control room and Brok was by himself. Moving in the shadows, I was on him before he knew it.

The look of surprise and horror on my target's face is a testament to my Imperial spy training. Brok was eliminated and Jabba himself finally contacted me. Jabba spoke in short sentences so the comlink translator could keep up with his majesty's guttural language, "You have served me well. I will not forget this. I may have need of you in the future. For now though, I cast you out of my protection. You are on your own."

Success was mine! I had earned Jabba's confidence! Not only did I earn the crime lord's confidence, but Brok had managed to lay his hands on some extraordinary cargo. Both the Rebellion and the Empire had agents scouring the planet for whatever it was. That means I had to get it first. Sitting in my XP-38 outside the White Thranta's shipping office, I looked over the letter I had picked up inside. Kaesii? I hadn't heard that name in a long time. It was old business that needed to be settled, but with this cargo that Brok had, I couldn't indulge in old spy games. What was I to do? Contact Kaesii or prevent these Rebel scums from getting to the cargo?

Part 3 – A Trail In The Desert

I was told to expect you.”

She looks just way she did since I last saw her.

“Why do you want to see me?” I played along.

Did she recognize me? Could she recognize me in this disguise? I had to know. I loved her once and I’d hate to have to kill her. My cover and my pledge to the Empire came first.

“I am supposed to recover plans for a military speeder prototype speeder.”

I sure hope it’s not an Imperial prototype. That’d end these nostalgic memories in a heartbeat...your heartbeat.

“What does that have to do with me?” I acted confused.

She squinted and looked at me from top to bottom. This was the moment of deception and truth. If she couldn’t tell it was me now, she’d never figure it out. She hesitated and replied, “It’s my job.”

“You sure don’t look like a spy.” I acted dumb, but she hadn’t told me she was a spy.

“That’s because I am good at my job.”

Then why did you admit to me that you were a spy?

She was a beautiful woman and good recruit once. We trained together at the academy. We fell in love and then became spies for the Empire. I made the Elite corps and she didn’t. It was that simple. She didn’t make rank and was assigned to Imperial Administration on Coruscant. She was a strong woman and wouldn’t have any part of that. It wasn’t the first time this war had ruined a love affair. Reading her AWOL report was the last I saw of her and now this.

What was "this"? While infiltrating the White Thranta shipping offices, I pulled a letter off of a downed enemy agent. Scanning it for clues, it was obviously a forged transit letter. Forgery was her specialty and her name was Kaesii.

I took her job and headed back into the desert. Kaesii was the closest thing I'd ever known to love and even though it was a long time ago, I was relieved she wasn't working against the Empire. I don't know how she was all wrapped up in this mess, but if she could lead me to Jabba (assuming Jabba had Brok's cargo), I could finish this mission and she could stay alive as long as this didn't end up in treason.

White Thranta; I had just left the place and she wanted me to go back in. Tactically, it was an advantage. They wouldn't expect a saboteur to come back so soon, I knew the layout of the place and the strength of their agents, so this would be a piece of cake. The receptionist even recognized me and let me into the lower levels thinking I was *supposed* to be there. The stolen data for the military speeder was logged into a datapad that was in the repair bay. I was in and out in a puff of smoke.

Returning to the Lucky Despot and Kaesii, I acted like it was a tough job and acted overconfidently like an agent fresh out of the academy. Sneering, I handed her the datapad, "Looking for this?"

"Excellent work. The Manager of the White Thranta is already looking for these."

She's trying to use me as a pawn. I pretended to be surprised.

"You...WHAT?!?"

"I was setting him up. By telling one of his rivals that we could sell him the plans, I knew it would get back to the White Thranta manager. Once he started looking for his missing plans, it would prove to our buyer that we had the exact plans he wanted to buy."

That isn't the spy game sweetheart, that's a street con.

"Seems like a longshot to me." I had to play this off as a dead end. On a hunch, I figured this wasn't the cargo that had been stolen from Brok.

"I had faith in you. Besides, the extra money from the blackmail of Dren to Jabba was a nice boost to our payoffs."

There you go. Tell me what I need to know so I can move on and get back to forgetting you.

"What do you think being a spy is all about honey? Even after all that I've told you about this mission, there is still plenty you don't know."

I acted impressed and left. Leaving the Lucky Despot always felt the same. An oasis in the desert, the Lucky always felt like you were leaving something precious behind and headed for nothing but trouble. I'd made her connection with Jabba and so far it was a dead end. I didn't have time for this nonsense anymore.

The Rebels were chasing down stolen cargo. Vital cargo and I had to get there first. My target was Captain Carh'la Bastra. This Rebel scum must know something about the cargo Brok had and I mean to get it.

"So, is Imperial Intelligence sending younglings to check up on me now?"

It was an obvious bluff and she couldn't break my cover on a good day.

"I am not an Imperial Agent. I was the one that helped Solo." I lied.

That name should get her interested.

Ok, your bio-metrics check out with those sent to me by Inaldra. So why are you here?"

Because my dear Inaldra doesn't encrypt her security systems well enough. What's a good sucker line that heroes use? Ahhh...I've got it...

Puffing my chest out and holding my chin high, "I've decided that I should help the Rebellion."

Hook, line and...

"A shipment that I am interested in has been acquired by three different groups. A Jawa Trading Party, Valarians and Darklighters. Here is the information that I have. Let's start with the Jawas first. They are on a trade circuit. Here is their last known location.

Finally a clue. Brok's cargo is getting sliced up and sold all across the desert. Whatever it was must be pretty important if they're chasing it this far. There's a good chance that after those dirty Jawa get a hold of it, it'll be nothing but scrap.

Tosche Station, the Lars Homestead and a Sandcrawler full of blaster marks led me along an obvious trail. Everyone who has touched this cargo has either been killed or robbed. With the way these criminals treat each other, I still can't help but wonder why so many citizens reject the Emperor's peace and order. Such a shame.

The first target was a simpleton named Janus. He was a warehouse manager that didn't watch his back and ended up getting swoop-jacked by some roving Desert Demons. From there, the trail led to the Lars' Homestead. I didn't know who this Zef Ando was but even if he was a filthy Rodian, anyone who lived here was under Imperial Protection. This protection order came down from so high that even I didn't have clearance to know why, but the last Imperial who tried to muscle their way through this place looking for droids ended up on the wrong side of Vader's Force choke. Interpreting orders is a funny thing. Sometimes you can do your job too well and end up dead. I hoped this wasn't one of those times.

The droids the Jawa sold him were malfunctioning and the whole thing would have been a dead end if he hadn't had the coordinates of the Sandcrawler. It never ceases to amaze me how many times junk passes hands on this forsaken ball of rock. This was getting ridiculous. Jawas with encrypted datapads held the cargo list I needed. Tusken Raiders stole the data chips because they were "shiny". Desert Demons were randomly killing my contacts and the sand in my boots was really starting to make me irritable. I don't know how the Rebellion manages to succeed while working in these conditions.

"Yeah, I've got the manifest." I played this up to start earning her confidence, "Tuskens hit these Jawas hard. So hard that I think it might have been a cover-up. The Jawas managed to escape the attack and set up a camp over a nearby ridge. If it had just been the Tuskens who attacked them, I doubt the Jawas would be in such a bad situation. Jawas run these trade routes almost every day and we never see them beat down from a Tusken attack, so why now? My

guess is someone else hit the Jawas and the Tusks came by afterwards to pick apart what was left."

She considered what I said for a moment and then focused on the mission, "Who knew that the Jawas could have scavenged so much? Next, I need you to go to the Valarian base. Uploading the information now."

It seems the Valarian Syndicate had bought a piece of Brok's cargo. They had a storage yard not too far out of Bestine. The Imperial detachment there keeps an eye on them but lets them stay in business. It's a great way to farm information and find out what the Rebellion is up to in this system from time to time. I had advance recon data. Infiltrating the place should be easy.

On one side of the camp, Valarian guards stood around wasting time unaware of the trail of bodies on the other side of the camp. I moved in and out of the warehouse depot like a surgeon's scalpel, removing living obstructions and deftly searching through the piles of equipment. There were 5 pallets that had equipment from the Jawa traders and from Tosche Station, but still, nothing that resembled anything the Rebels could threaten the Empire with.

"The last place to check out is the Darklighter storage facility. I am uploading the information now."

Time was running out. I needed to find Brok's cargo and I needed to forget Kaesii.

"Damn. How did those Desert Demons find this place?" I've been chasing this cargo too long and too hard to lose it now.

"Desert Demons! I couldn't do anything to stop them and they are cleaning the place out!" The guard was petrified - - so petrified that he probably didn't try real hard when the horde of Desert Demons rode through the place. The race was on and I needed that data. He was still hiding in a ditch near the mouth of the cave.

"How long?"

"They just blew their way in!"

He was shaking in his boots, "Desert Demons! I couldn't do anything to stop them, and they are cleaning the place out!"

"How quickly do we have before it's all cleared out?"

"15 minutes tops."

He was guessing, but I couldn't afford to gamble so the race was on.

I ran into the Darklighter Cave, tapping the coordinates into my datapad so I could send an Imperial Detachment out here later. I managed to skulk my way down to the first three terminals but there were so many of them, I couldn't stay hidden. I had to blast my way through. The Desert Demons were using some kind of projectile weapons. Not as efficient as a blaster, but if they managed to take me down...

"Unghh!" I was hit! I lay there incapacitated. The demons started walking towards me. I knew I'd be dead soon if I couldn't shake this off. Before they could finish me off, I pulled myself back together and headed further down into the cave. They didn't follow me; they must have been protecting something. I readied myself for the next run at getting to the terminals that held the data that I so desperately needed.

Dexterity stims, Fitness stims, combat efficiency stims; I had grabbed everything I had out of my backpack and jabbed it into my arms. I boosted my system with everything I had, took a deep breath and charged the cavern.

Dodging and weaving I worked my through the Darklighter warehouse hidden in the mountains, taking well aimed shots at Desert Demons, slicing into shipping terminals to get the data. It was easy enough to slice the terminals once I could get to them. The hard part was not catching a bullet in the back from one of these psychotic scavengers while I cracked the systems.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5...that's all of them.

Bastra had given me the mission to find out where the cargo had been shipped and I had found it.

Earning her trust earned me the information she had about Brok's cargo. This leg of the mission had one last objective.

I knew how to crack systems, but this equipment's been kicked in the dirt by Tusken, Jawa, Desert Demons and every other filthy creature in this endless sea of sand and garbage. I could probably do it, but I had a higher risk of corrupting the data. If the Sullustan had the right kind of access codes, he could get the data without risking its integrity.

Her Rebel slicer had been kept on ice by some gunrunners. It wasn't too hard to find him or to sneak in and get him away from those gunrunners. Lavar cracked the code easier than I could. He found out the data was in a droid. Another droid being dragged across the desert - - did anyone do anything else here but steal things, hide them in droids and sell them? I longed for R&R at a luxury hotel on Coruscant or Naboo, but I had to chase down Brok's cargo. In any event, Captain Bastra was completely sold on my allegiance and she new my next contact.

Now all I had to do was forget Kaesii.

Part 4 - All Roads Lead To Jabba

"Bartender! Bring me another drink!"

I'd stopped onto the Mos Eisley Cantina to get the latest word on the street about what was going down at Jabba's. Sure, throwing back some Corellian Ale while I was tracking down top secret hardware and infiltrating the most powerful criminal empire in the galaxy was a little sloppy, but I needed to get Kaesii out of my head. She'd be the death of me if I didn't. Besides, if there was a spy out there that wasn't carrying around at least a dozen haunting secrets that didn't drive them to drink or death sticks, they weren't working hard enough.

Bastra's slicer had given me info leading me straight into the heart of Jabba's palace which made me either insanely loyal or incredibly stupid – the truth was that I was probably both.

There is something to be said about a 600 year old giant slug that rules the most powerful criminal Empire in the Galaxy. I had been kidnapped by a dimwitted Bounty Hunter on Corellia and dragged to Tansarii Point Station by

mistake. I fell into Han Solo's lap and chased his seedy underworld connections across Tatooine so I could bring him and his criminal network down hard. If I was lucky, I might even pick up some information on Rebel movement and military strength in the area. So far this unplanned mission had left me kicked around by thugs and thieves, shot at by Tusken Raiders and Desert Demons, stabbed by freakish Krayt cultists and chased parts from a disassembled droid from one end of this stinking planet to the other. From Mos Eisley to Mos Espa, it seemed like everyone on this blasted planet was doing something illegal and Jabba has his dirty hands in everything.

Playing the role of a mercenary looking for work, I made some small talk with a couple of seasoned smugglers, "So what have you heard? Is there any work?" He was an easy fellow and didn't mind chatting, "I hear business is good. Jabba is paying well these days, so you could probably make some easy credits if you can aim that blaster."

His partner was less forgiving. She looked at me with a suspicious eye and sneered while she spoke, "Well, if you are who you say you are, you won't have much of a problem, but if you're an Imperial spy trying to get in, you won't make it very far before they kill you." Sometimes it was hard digging for information in a city full of Imperial Stormtroopers, but my cover was solid.

"Do I look like an Imperial Spy?" I shook my head, flopping my Lekku about and tossed her a disarming smile.

For a moment, I thought she could see right through me, but then she relaxed and sat back in her chair, "No, I guess not." Her instincts were telling her the truth, but she believed her eyes instead. Lucky me. I quickly ended my conversation, left the place and caught a quick shuttle back to Mos Espa. Bastra had given me the name of my next contact. It was the Toydarian named Watto. I had seen the name in Imperial briefs before and he was another "hand's off" mystery with a protection order all the way from the top so I couldn't rough him up. I'd have to bargain with the smelly Toydarian to find the droid.

Joy.

I found his shop on the edge of town and strolled in. "Hi chuba da nago?" The smell from the gas in their Toydarian bellies that helps keeps them afloat makes me sick. All aliens smell, but these flapping blue gas bags rank among the worst.

"I'm looking for a droid." Pain shot across my cheeks as I struggled to keep my face from reflexively twisting in disgust.

"Ahh thee has come to the right place I think." His wings flapped and his little blue body bobbed up and down.

"The droid came in with a special cargo from Tansarii Point Station."

The greedy blue party balloon didn't miss his chance at profit, "Then thee must be willing to pay a special price, no?"

"I know this droid. It has already been sold. You can't have it."

What was he up to? Why did he just set me up for paying a high price for the droid if he didn't have it?

"Could you tell me who bought it? I must get this droid."

"What do you think I am? You come in here wanting me to give you directions to buy a droid from someone else? Well, it's not going to happen!"

I wanted to strangle him right then. Imperial high command says I can't touch him.

"Maybe I could do something for you in exchange?"

"Ah yes, maybe you could at that. There are these deadbeats that have something of mine. You could get it back from them I think."

There it is. He was setting me up to do his dirty work in exchange for information about the droid.

"Where are these...deadbeats?" He told me where they were and I darted out of his shop as fast as I could. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. Outside his shop I desperately gulped in "fresh" air. I had been holding my breath to fend off the foul stench around the little blue swindler.

Watto's "deadbeats" were on the edge of town; simple thieves that lived off of the slums and the occasional tourist that wandered into them. Slapping around slum thieves to find out where the droid was felt like beating up schoolchildren to take their lunch credits and really, what drives a sentient being to be a garbage thief? I'll never know. If that wasn't maddening enough, I brought back Watto's part only to discover that he had stripped the droid I was hunting down into parts!

"Ah yes, the lost droid. You see, I broke it up. It is no more.

"WHAT?! You little blue flying...."

Remember, he is protected by Imperial High Command. Vader himself will probably strangle me if I hurt this little blue bastard.

"But I know where some of the parts went. If you get them for me, I can help you rebuild it." I figured he was stringing me along, but I had to follow the lead even if it was against my better judgment.

"Where are the parts, Watto?"

Watto knew more than he was telling me, but at least he knew where all the parts were. Chasing it down wasn't much of a mystery - - the real mystery here was finding out what Brok's cargo was. If the Rebel scum wanted it so bad and the Empire was right behind them, it had to be something important. Along the way, I still hadn't found out any clue to what it was, but I'd get there first if it was the last thing I do.

The body was easy enough to find. It started out as a thin lead, but if it's a droid part, it ends up in disgusting Jawa hands sooner or later. I caught up with the Jawa trading caravan and the miners who bought the droid body soon after.

Syndil Na'Marr was supposed to have the legs of the droid by Watto's reckoning. I wasn't sure I'd need its legs though. Whatever it was carrying was important, not whether or not it worked. In the end, I decided to chase down the droid's legs. If I ended up in a tight spot on this mission, I could program it to scoot to a safe location - - keep it hidden and safe until I could double back and retrieve it.

I thought this would be another simple errand, but when I asked her about the parts she started acting suspicious. I casually asked her about the astromech's legs, "I am looking for some droid legs you bought from Watto".

"Some R2 type legs? Why would you be looking for them?" She was spooked and I had to know why.

"I'm not really sure, actually. I am told they are special." I played innocent.

"You can say that again!" She was all too eager to tell me about it though I couldn't figure out why she was acting a little afraid.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I bought them from Watto intending to attach them to an R-type droid I'm building, but they wouldn't work. I had them laying around and the next thing I know, an Imperial Captain barges in and demands them."

At least our operatives are chasing the right leads. We have to get that cargo before the Rebellion does.

Maybe I could get her to slip up so I could discover if she's involved, "What did you do?"

"What could I do? He was confiscating the part. I gave them to him. I really wish I hadn't though. I probably could have bluffed him."

Too bad for you. Now I'll have add you to the list of people to be arrested. Let's see why you didn't want to cooperate with the Empire.

"Why didn't you want to give them to him?"

"Because a friend of mine came in shortly after looking for them as well. When I told him what happened, he seemed to get rather anxious."

A Rebel Agent, I'm sure.

"What did he do?"

"Well you see, he's a pilot. He took off after the Imperial Captain in his ship. He radioed me later and said he shot up the Captain's AT-ST."

Aiding and abetting a Rebel agent. Fool.

It was easy enough to get the location out of her, so I made my way out into the desert again. She made me promise not to arrest him. I lied. I was going to have them both arrested and by the time this case was done, I'd have half the people on the planet filling up the Imperial prison on Dathomir.

The trail was hot. I passed a detachment of Stormtrooper commandos and a couple of Rebel camps along the way. Her pilot "friend" was just where she said he would be. An AT-ST lay on the ground. It was a smoking ruin. He was a Rebel pilot for sure and with so many Rebel camps around here, I couldn't just blast him in case he passed the legs off to one of them. He wouldn't be able to tell me where they were if he was dead.

I walked up on him casually but his guard was up and he barked at me, "Hey, who are you? What are you doing here?"

"Your friend Syndil sent me, she was worried about you."

Rebel friendships are their weakness.

He lied to my face. He was making the story up as he went along, "I saw this scout walker get blown up. Thought I would check for survivors."

Bothans are always quick to sniff out spies so I acted suspicious to throw him off guard, "Don't give me that, Syndil told me you blew it up with your starfighter."

"What does she know? She's not exactly the swiftest speeder in the race, if you know what I mean."

Nice friend you are.

"You're the one who told her, what does that make you?"

"I didn't tell her anything. She makes stuff up. I'm certainly not going to attack a scout walker and become a fugitive."

Then why did you come here you fool? You weren't just "wandering by". Maybe I could get him to crack.

"Well, you're here. The wreckage is here. Seems pretty cut and dried to me."

"Delusions. Sun baked delusions pal. I'm out of here. Good luck with those Tusks down there."

"What a hero."

He was no more use to me. I left him behind after slipping a tracker onto his flight suit as he walked away. The race for Brok's cargo was on and I was in the lead. That slimy Bothan took out one of our guys, but he didn't have the parts. I was sure he wanted to get out of here before an Imperial Garrison showed up to find out what happened to that scout walker patrol. I was also sure he thought he was sending me to a dead end, but I found the legs at the Tusken camp. They outnumbered me ten-to-one so I snuck in from the back of the camp. A couple of those masked abominations cornered me in the tent where the legs were, but I took them out quietly with my dagger and escaped into the hills.

The next day, I was back at Watto's. I lost my temper once, but at least he was still willing to work with me. Watto's next clue lead me to the droid's motivator. I had to pull it out of the wreckage of an idiot racer who thought he could fly [the old Mos Espa swoop track](#). He wasn't good enough and now his remains rot in the desert while Tusks and Womp Rats scavenge the mess he left behind. The track has been illegal for years with all the development that sprung up. The law was made for a reason, but that never stops racers. Funniest of all was where I found the booster controller. Some crackpot moisture farmer bought it and put it in his speeder. When I made an offer to buy it, he says, "I don't think so. I like the get up 'n go it gives me." I made him a generous offer but the cranky old fella just sicced his crazy kids on me. If that wasn't enough, I was on my way back to Watto's and a baby squill ran out of an alley and chewed a chunk out of my boot. I blasted it in the street and little did I know that wouldn't be the last time I saw one of those up close and personal.

The next piece was the droid's diagnostic controller. Some old hermit had bought it. Watto laughed at me after he told me where it was, "The cave and very likely your grave can be found there."

When I climbed off my speeder bike, a chill ran down my spine, even in the Tatooine heat. A yellow mist rolled out of the mouth of the cave. My arms were getting sore from all the stims I was taking, but I stabbed my arm with another round of chemical cocktails to help me get through this hunt. Right inside the cave, it started getting ugly. Mountain Squills started coming at me from all directions and I had no back-up. They ran through the mist screaming and flailing. Their yellow eyes and gleaming ivory teeth were the scariest thing I'd seen on this planet so far. Running around a corner, one of them was standing in the mist and towered over me - - he almost made me his lunch. This stupid cave seemed to go around in circles with death around every corner.

I was exhausted and almost out of stims when I finally found the hermit. I couldn't believe an old man lived at the bottom of this damnable cave! He was a Rodian with black bulbous eyes. I think he was blind. What was an old blind Rodian doing living here?

"Well met traveler! What brings you to my small and lonely abode?"

I made some small talk with the old man and after he had babbled on about philosophy and some made some crazy challenge, I pocketed the diagnostic controller and made my way out of the cave without another word to him. He had rambled on about the glory of the Old Republic and spread lies about the Empire being "evil". This would be another "beautiful" Tatooine vacation hotspot on my long list of places to have the Empire clean out with flamethrowers and blasters.

Sometimes it seemed like a spy's life was one long trail of lies and deceit. Lying to old blind men certainly didn't make me proud, but the stakes were high and someone had to get the job done. The only joys in life were catching criminals, libations to forget the past and the glory of the Empire.

I made my way back to Watto's place to find out where the next piece was and my instincts had been telling me where it was all along. It was at Jabba's palace.

If I was going to get in there, I needed more cover than just some wandering

mercenary looking for work. I needed an angle. The race for Brok's cargo was on, so I didn't have much time to put together an elaborate cargo. I made my way back to the Darklighter estate. When I was tracking down the Darklighter Cache, I noticed there was an X-Wing that had been parked out back. I didn't know who owned it, but I was sure I could steal it and try to sell it to Jabba's henchmen. At the very least it might buy me my way through the front door and that was all I needed.

Honestly, it was kind of sad how ill-prepared the Darklighter security force was. It was broad daylight with all kinds of patrols and they never spotted me until it was too late. Hotwiring X-wings was pretty easy. Incom had some real design flaws in their ignition systems that I could take advantage of. It was a short hop to Anchorhead and I was able to rent a small spot to hide it in until I could get to Jabba's and lay the bait.

All this and my next steps could be my last. I was headed into the only place no spy had ever managed to survive unless he was one of Jabba's own. Legendary Crime Lord? Tracking down Solo? Certain death? I wouldn't have it any other way.

Part 5 - Dirty Deeds

"We've analyzed their attack sir and there is a danger. Should I have your ship standing by?"

I was a young officer. It seems like it happened so long ago.

"Evacuate? In our moment of triumph? I think you overestimate their chances!"

Governor Tarkin, hero of the Ghorman rebellion and now he's gone. Our greatest achievement and some of our best heroes are gone because of some lucky, unwashed insurgents. I should have insisted that the Governor leave the station. Was it my fault? So few of us escaped the rebel's cowardly attack... How long will it be before we put an end to the rebellion? Why do these people fear law and order so badly? Can the galaxy truly be filled with so many remorseless criminals with no values? Don't they want peace and order in the galaxy? What happened to me? Where am I? I'm daydreaming. No, I'm unconscious. Toughen up. Shake it loose and get it. You can do it...

Lips parched, dehydrated from lying in the desert, I came to my senses. Sharpen up soldier. Shake it off and go over the mission details.

Pressing an extra button on his Imperial issued comlink, the spy updated his field mission log as he came to his senses, "Field log; Mission Update: A Bounty Hunter fulfilling an open Imperial contract surprised me while I was undercover on Corellia. He brought me in with a handful of refugees to Tansarii Point Station for his contract payout.

Fortune found, I ran across one of the Empire's most wanted targets: Han Solo. Earning his confidence, I convinced him to take me to Tatooine where I could track down his network of traitors and spies. Once I finish my investigation, the Empire can move in on a raid and quickly eliminate the lot of them. If this mission is successful, we will capture a highly valuable fugitive and cripple the rebellion in one swift stroke.

Solo's key contacts and operatives have been identified: Vourk, Mayor Mikdanyell Guh'Rantt, Toggi Bok, Brok Ziamzun and the rebel scum Captain Carh'la Bastra are all at large. Targets eliminated include my old buddy Dren, Vaigonn Shin and some bit-part players not worth mentioning in my report.

During my investigation into Solo's operations, I uncovered a situation out of control. A droid and some sort of top secret cargo had been delivered to the White Thranta shipping company. The shipping company is a front for smugglers and undoubtedly working with Solo and the Rebellion. A criminal with the only known alias as "Brok Ziamzun" brought in the cargo.

Solo's connection to the galactic crime lord Jabba the Hutt has also been confirmed. My undercover work with the street criminal Vourk tied me into Bib Fortuna and eventually earned me some sort of favor for Jabba. If I can get into Jabba's palace, I can acquire the last pieces to the droid associated with the missing cargo and I might be able to find out what Jabba's connection was to Brok. If I can make that connection, I may discover exactly what that cargo is. Currently, Imperial and Rebel agents are aggressively searching for this unidentified cargo.

"Field report over."

I'm going to get that cargo first.

It didn't take me too long to shake off the haze. Those filthy Tusken's ambushed me while I was raiding a Valarian caravan. That nauseating Rodian working the front door at Jabba's sent me to do some of his dirty little errands. I told Reelo that I had *already* earned Jabba's favor by taking out Brok, but he wasn't buying it. I suppose a lot of losers, spice peddlers and all sorts rejects try to talk their way into the palace.

The most ironic part about being a spy is that people think you're lying when your not and telling the truth when your serving them up a bold face lie. Here, it didn't matter which was which. Reelo wasn't letting me in either way unless I proved myself.

Reelo had me rough up some Alkharan bandits; a small test to make sure I wouldn't fail the real task he needed done. "I like your style" he said to me. I'm sure he tells that to all the eager, empty headed fools looking for Jabba's attention. "Get out there and make us proud." The words escaped his mouth like air squeezing through a pinched balloon. Long undercover missions can drive you a little crazy. I've been down under working with these low-lifes so long, I've lost my objectivity. I can't wait to come back and put that dirty little Rodian out of his misery. No time to think about that now though. All that matters now is efficient killing. Sure, I'd do Reelo's little jobs to help Jabba as long as it would get me into the throne room.

The Alkharans were all pretty weak compared to Imperial precision and a decent blaster. Things started getting interesting after that. Lady Valarian was a third rate crime boss trying to muscle in on Jabba's operations. Apparently her thugs had been nosing around and I'd be the one to teach them a lesson.

I tracked them to a black market near a Jawa trading caravan. Lady Valarian must be working hard to expand her own pathetic little operations because while I was moving in on her thugs, another mercenary was picking them off like amateurs. He was a sharp shooter for sure. They never had a chance. Roughing up weak competition and collecting gambling debts was an easy way to earn my way into the palace, but time was of the essence. I needed to get any information on that cargo that I could.

Ree Yees was my next barrier to the throne room. Yees was a belligerent three-eyed, goat faced slob. I'd warmed up to Reelo with a small gift of blob candy that I'd picked up while punishing Valarian's men. With just a nudge, Reelo was all too happy to tell me that Yees was a drunken spicer who often

got into fights against bigger opponents. Everyone who worked the front door at the palace knew Ree Yees was a joke. Yees would show up to his post with one or two of his eye-stalks blackened after he'd gotten into the spice and let his mouth get the better of him; all three of eyes would be bruised if he really needed to be taught a lesson.

Yees was less creative than Reelo and his errands had me chasing more of Valarian's thugs, but then he slipped. Someone managed to walk out of the palace with a prototype warhead - - his neck was on the line and he needed the weapon back. I knew Jabba dealt in the weapons trade, but this warhead was a problem. The regional governor should be investigated for letting this kind of ordinance get into the hands of fools like these. It might be something or it might be nothing. I had to find out what it was. It might even be the same cargo that Brok moved through his smuggling operation. That would explain Jabba's interest for sure.

Jabba thinks the Sennex Pirates lifted it. I suspect Yees was spiced out at his post and someone walked off with it to make a tidy little profit.

When I caught up with the pirates who stole it, I had to laugh. They had stolen something, but I wouldn't call it a warhead. It was so old and so patched together, the only thing it would blow up was its owner. I disabled the thing and carted it back to the palace.

Once Jabba's handlers caught word that I knew where the compound was, it got their attention. Ephant Mon took control of the situation because there was more work and Yees didn't have the smarts to get the job done. That earned me another step closer to Jabba's throne room.

Part 6 - The Sennex Compound

Some time ago, Gardulla the Hutt ran the slave trade in this sector. Jabba did some kind of deal with her and has owned the flesh trade here ever since.

These pirates are either real brave or real stupid to muscle in on Jabba, but if Lady Valarian was trying to muscle in on him, there was a good chance it was open season on Jabba's turf. I'm sure that's why the dimwitted doormen at the palace were so eager to get some extra help taking shots at the competition. The way things are shaping up here, it should be an all out gang war soon.

When this sort of turf war goes down, it's easy for a guy like me to pluck vital information from desperate fools. One of Valarian's thugs tried to save his skin by rolling over on his Sennex contacts. It didn't work.

Getting inside would be trickier. Stealth and a well placed smoke bomb put me just inside the front door and close enough to take out the front guards. After that, I was totally exposed. I didn't know what I was going to run into, but hopefully my covert ops armor would do the trick.

My trusty T-21 wouldn't be any good though. Indoors, it's carbines all the way for me. One by one, I moved through the base taking down any pirate I could find. Ephant sure was one of the ugliest aliens I've come across in a long time, but he knew how to run a mission ops. I was finally getting to flex my muscle *and it felt good* .

First, my targets were slacker pirates wandering around the base. Moving to stage two, Ephant directed me down to the lower levels for some reconnaissance, gather intel and hit some of their leaders hard to shake them up. From now on, they'd think twice about doing business in Jabba's territory. My next target was their central computer network. The guards had security key chips that I'd need to access the system. I moved through the based, eliminating the guards, collected the security chips and then I hacked my way into their computer system.

After wiping out their network, I turned around to see a big Rebel flag on the wall. How typical. It's not surprising to find out the rebellion is working with these kinds of criminals.

It was a long day of doing dirty deeds, but I needed to get into Jabba's throne room no matter what it takes.

Weapons Don't Start Wars...You Do!

I don't usually like to meet like this... it's too remote and too open. What is it you need?

Ahhh... I see. Let's go somewhere with not - so - many peering eyes. So, you're interested in our weapons technology. That's always good to hear... I've got an

operation to keep going. We have been able to expand our product line recently due to the influx of new resources.

Well, that *and* the fact that the battle on Rori doesn't seem to be letting up anytime soon. The longer it keeps going, the better for us and our operations. We have developed highly sophisticated weapons of all types that will prove advantageous to anyone.... including both the Empire and the Rebellion.

... Shhhhh! No, I can't reveal my contacts -- not for either side and definitely not out here where anyone could be watching.

So, let's get down to business. On this data pad you will find the stats and descriptions of the weapons in our new line. Take a minute to look it over.

Great, you're done, what do you think?

Hum... well I guess we can make some minor modifications to that one. But now we need to discuss the payment. Since we have such large orders for our other two customers, we have had to increase our fees a bit, but here is an estimate based on your needs. We take half now and half on delivery.

...What do you mean that's too much? If so, fine ...we can just keep going with our current customers...

What... what are you doing!

<blaster fire goes off>

"*That* is for betraying the Empire" said the Imperial Operative as he reholstered his blaster and called in for his pick-up.

FINDERS KEEPERS

Hey Derrick, my old friend.
Good to see you again. Do I
have a job for you!

Friend.... right.... like
that "friendly" job
on Yavin last month.

A simple misunderstanding....
this time will be better. I swear!

With just enough credits to sweeten the deal,
Derrick agreed to take the job. Now, all he
had to do is make a quick jump to Dathomir
to meet the broker's client.

Hey buddy, our old "pal" said
you had a job for me.

Well, if you've got
the nerve to
approach me on my
turf, I guess so.

Yeah, yeah, you're the big boss and I'm the
lowly smuggler. I get it, just cut to the chase.
My time is valuable and I'd like to get started.

Pushy, aren't we? Let's hope you fly as well
as you banter. Deliver this very special gift
to my friend on Tatooine...undetected. Do
you think you can handle that flyboy?

You will receive the rest of your
payment from my associate once
the goods are delivered.

Back on Derrick's ship,
the "Sabaac Shift"...

Hey boss,
what's the deal?

Get ready to jump to Tatooine.
We have a delivery to make.

Don't worry Kira, the
payoff will be worth a
little sand in your
boots. Just prepare
for the jump.

Ugh, you know I hate that dust ball.
Besides, if we go back there, Lady
Valerian isn't going to take it very well.





Bantha Cannon

While the vortex of hyperspace swirled outside the ship, I looked over the datapad once again. <<Proceed to Entooine. Focus dedicated energy receptors on planet. Wait for further instructions.>> Was it any coincidence that Rebel Command's briefings became increasingly brief as its bureaucracy grew in size and "efficiency"? Without a computer-research dump on Entooine, we wouldn't have known that the planet's temperature flickers between "tundra" and "carbonite." And who knew what season we'd be jumping into?

Imperial Research Station 13

"Lift-off in 25 seconds! Get your behinds on board and seal that hatch!"
"I'll take that aisle seat, if you please."
"Where do we stow our baggage?"
"Where's the head?"
"Where did you collect this mob?"
"Just can the wisecracks and pay attention to that starboard repulsorlift. It's been running kinda spotty."
"I've got a bad feeling about this trip."
"Yeah? Well maybe you'd rather wait around for the Imperials to land?"
"Point taken. I'll pay attention to the starboard repulsorlift."
"All right, everyone, this is your captain speaking. You'd best buckle in tight—it looks like we're in for a very bumpy ride."

Green Squad 3

Before I joined the Rebellion, I looked to the stars in hopes of one day roaming the galaxy. And now, after eight weeks of training with Green Squad, I'm almost ready to join the rest of the Alliance out there battling the Empire.

ATC-5/GS is not the most luxurious place I've ever been, but I think I've learned the meaning of teamwork and dedication.

The main level of the complex is old hat now—the medical ward, weapons locker, communications, barracks and kitchen, too. Every morning I hike, run and exercise outside in the jungles of Ksift. Everytime I return to the complex, I see the second floor; a great dome coming to a full arc just under the tree line. The top is camouflaged, and the windows are tinted. I sure would like to know what's up there.

Shadow Of The Dark Side

Standing behind the pilot's chair, the once-Jedi apprentice studied the beautiful green and blue planet below through the transparisteel cockpit view port, trying to discern a reason for his anxiety and uneasiness. Somehow, he didn't feel quite right about what, by appearances, was a peaceful, benevolent world.

Suddenly, the minor Jedi tensed, his eyes widening in surprise as he clutched at the headrest of the pilot's chair in front of him. A low moan escaped his lips as tears welled up in his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

Seated in front of him, the pilot turned to look over her shoulder, then laid her hand on his forearm. "What is it? What do you sense?"

The minor Jedi's eyes remained transfixed on the vast globe below. When he tried to speak, he began to sob, but he forced the words. "They...are calling to me. A hundred souls...such terrible anguish...." The Jedi apprentice effortfully calmed his trembling body and cleared his eyes, then returned the gaze of the concerned pilot. "They are imprisoned in blackness...in the shadow of the Dark Side. We must help them."

The Other Side of the Story

In the darkness of the bar, it was tough to make out the form of the man in the back booth. After studying him through the haze and smoke for several minutes, young Rengor Vanth decided that it was time to begin the interview. He checked his Sector 242 NewsLine ID and cautiously approached.

Before he had taken two steps, the hunter named Malis turned to stare at the reporter. Rengor fought the nervousness he felt building in his stomach. The hunter watched dispassionately as Rengor slowly approached. The reporter smiled weakly. "Hunter Malis, is it?"

The hunter looked away, not a trace of emotion crossing his scarred face. "Sit down. Order a drink -- it'll calm your nerves."

Rengor eased into the booth, trying to ignore the large bloodstain on the table. He punched in an order for a mug of lum. He noticed Malis sizing him up. The hunter had a cold face, with steel gray eyes and a determined stare: the look of a killer. Suddenly, this "choice" assignment seemed like a bad idea.

Malis sneered, "Never met a hunter before, have you?"

Rengor tried to put on an air of bravado, and failed miserably. "No ... not until now. Shall we begin the interview?" Rengor pulled his small holo-recorder from his work pouch, and powered it up.

"Audio only, no vid. It's bad for business."

"It's your interview."

The robotender hovered over to the table, depositing the mug of lum in front of Rengor. The cost was an exorbitant 15 credits. Rengor paid it without complaint.

"Interview with hunter Malis. Are you ready?"

Malis simply nodded while taking a long draught from his steaming mug. Rengor began.

"Hunter Malis, in the past few years you've become a notable hunter. Your reputation has steadily grown. In fact, you've become something of a celebrity, even beyond hunter circles. Yet, virtually nothing is known of your background

or your motives. People want to know who you are and why you became a hunter. What led you to this profession?"

Malis smiled. Rengor found it chilling.

"It was a long time ago, kid. And a personal matter. Suffice it to say that I found my own reasons to stalk criminals. They've earned what happens to them. Death is too good for most of them."

Rengor looked down at his datapad, trying to find an acceptable way to phrase his next question. "Hunter Malis, bounty hunting is a ... *controversial* field. To be honest, a lot of people are uncomfortable with how you and your colleagues earn their living ... killing for credits. How do you justify your actions?"

Malis let out a slow breath.

"It's a civilized profession for an uncivilized galaxy. Simple. I take care of the people everyone else is afraid of."

He pulled a blaster carbine from his holster. Rengor wondered if Malis would shoot him right there. After a few seconds, Malis put the weapon on the table. "Kid, I just scared the life out of you. But I want you to know something. If I was going to tag you, you'd know it. I'm a hunter, not a murderer. And I don't have to justify what I do, or how I do it, to anyone. I do what I do because someone has to do it ... and I'm good at it. I'm a bounty hunter -- to you, that equates to killer.

"But I'm the man who may be stopping that criminal, who, if he isn't stopped, might end up killing you or someone you care about. I'm someone who keeps order and this galaxy desperately needs it. My acquisitions -- that's what we call the vermin we hunt -- are people who have earned a death sentence. My last acquisition was a little gravel-maggot named Yerlad. I'll admit I went a little rough on him, but those scars will always remind him of me. He fears me now, and fears my kind. That's good, because fear is the only way to keep those animals in line. He killed five people: five men who put their lives on the line for the Empire. He claimed to be fighting for the Rebel Alliance, and I'm sure the widows really appreciate that."

Rengor apprehensively asked his next question. "So you're saying that the ends justify the means?"

"Of course. The Empire is trying to maintain order, to protect the galaxy from itself. Without the Empire, there would be anarchy. Do you want a return to what it was liked during the Republic? Alderaan was a perfect example. That planet and its revolutionaries were a threat to the stability of the Empire and the galaxy. They earned what they got. Now, look at what that so-called Alliance endorses. An armed revolution. Have you given any thought to what that means? If they get their way, millions will die in the fighting -- all for a "noble" cause that will be forgotten as soon as they get a taste of power. Look at their biggest hero, that kid from the Outer Rim. He *murdered* over a million men. Those men had families and children. That's the kind of scum I hunt. And if that's not good enough for you and the spineless drones you entertain, they can try to stop me."

Rengor was beginning to feel ill. This was going to be a long day ...

"A good friend is one who always pays for the first and last drinks of the evening ...

"An even better friend is one whose bounty you just collected, paying as he does by his absence for all the drinks in-between. And the best part of it is you don't even have to listen to all his stupid jokes ..."

— Saras Krenin

"Independent? Half of those bloody headhunters aren't even housebroken!"

— Governor Serdif Tount

Death in the Slave Pits of Lorr

Death in the Slave Pits of Lorr, Or What I Did On My Inter-Term Break

By Tash Arranda

35:9:27

Lorr is a sunny planet in the Kanz sector of the Outer Rim. Its major exports are delicious gapanga fruits, dazzling gemstones, and attractive stars of stage and holos. It is home to a talented, friendly people, and there are lots of interesting things to see and do. It looked like an excellent place to spend a vacation... until I crossed paths with crazed Imperial agents trying to unleash a terrible force from Lorr's horrific, bloody past. [If I were an HC tutor droid and not an overqualified class-one scientific research unit, I might be impressed rather than resigned by this "attention getter" in the first paragraph.]

If not for the Empire, I might not have visited Lorr at all. My brother Zak and I had arrived on Delaya at the end of a field trip discover to that our homeworld of Alderaan was gone, destroyed by the Empire. Our parents Kalf and Milessa were dead, but we had one living relative who took us in: Hoole, the brother of our aunt's Shi'ido husband Moloch.

That was the beginning of a series of adventures that brought us to Lorr. We encountered an evil Imperial scientist's terrifying experiments and crash-landed on a haunted planet. Our starship, the Shroud, was in terrible shape after the crash, and Zak and Uncle Hoole had given the ship up as dead. Of course, Zak has come back from the dead twice now, so maybe we should have known better. Fortunately, the Rebel Alliance offered to salvage the ship after we helped them put an end to the scientist's project.

A Rebel named Han Solo brought us to Lorr, where he had a friend with connections and a starship repair facility. This excited Uncle Hoole... well, it made him less grim than usual anyway. Uncle Hoole had always wanted to study the Lorradians. They are known throughout the galaxy as masters of mimicry -- a culture our changeling uncle would naturally take an interest in, even if he was not an anthropologist. Uncle Hoole's interest matched my own, for in ancient times Lorr had been set free by legendary guardians of freedom and justice, the object of my aspirations: the Jedi Knights.

The Occupation

"Forbidden from speaking aloud by their Argazdan enslavers, the Lorradians developed a sophisticated nonverbal language. Using this "kinetic communication", the Lorradians organized a rebellion that would eventually help end Argazdan rule. The implication for present day government is clear: harsh laws to end dissent will only ensure the downfall of their enforcers." -- Legal historian Janu Godalhi

Thousands of years ago, Lorrd was targeted by a secessionist faction led by Governor Myrial of nearby Argazda. Condemning the Republic as a faithless, morally corrupt institution, the "Myrialites" took advantage of the Republic's preoccupation with the Mandalorian Wars and staged a revolution that left them in control of the Kanz sector, which they renamed the Argazdan Redoubt. They then began attacking and enslaving systems throughout the sector in what came to be known as the Kanz Disorders. When the Lorradians allied with the Amaltannan resistance against their enslavers, Myrial punished them with enslavement, and forbade them from speaking on pain of death.

I knew from my study of Jedi legends that three hundred years later, Jedi Knights led by Mari-Elan Nora freed the Lorradians. I could not wait to learn more about what the Jedi had done on Lorrd thousands of years ago -- and we were heading to where it had all happened.

Solo's friend Fiolla's operation was located in Qatamer, which is the capital of the province of Kinyov and is considered the birthplace of modern Lorradian culture. Kinyov is mostly desert and was sparsely inhabited during the initial Argazdan attacks, which is why it did not get bombed from orbit like Frezen, New Shallos, and other major settlements. Refugees from all over Lorrd fled here, but were rounded up by Argazdan troops and sold as slaves. The invaders turned Qatamer, once a tiny desert outpost, into the headquarters for their occupation and slaving operations.

As the Millennium Falcon began its approach to Qatamer spaceport, I was amazed to see what could only be the legendary Slave Pits of Lorrd. Not that they are hard to spot -- even the smallest one is larger in diameter than the Ancient Abyss of Felucia -- but their location had been lost for millennia; and

many people had come to believe the Pits were a myth. Uncle Hoole explained that archaeologists had discovered the buried Slave Pits using images taken from satellites, and had begun excavations months ago. How he finds time to keep up with anthropological subjects and track dangerous Imperial experiments across the galaxy I will never know. [I imagine it has absolutely nothing to do with having an eminently capable research assistant with the brain capacity of a supercomputer.]

Almost three hundred years into the Disorders, the Argazdans ordered their slaves to excavate massive pits, mysterious cone-shaped depressions. The Pits were built entirely by hand, at the cost of innumerable Lorradian slaves. Naturally, the Argazdans possessed a level of technology on par with other ancient civilizations, like droids and heavy machinery, so this fact remains perplexing.

And there was another mystery: control of the excavations had recently been taken from Lorradian archaeologists and given to an Argazdan scientist named Raygar. Uncle Hoole knew Raygar by reputation. The archaeologist had been involved in the Wolhanian expedition to Yavin, but now lacked the support of any reputable university or museum and was obsessed with locating mystical artifacts. So what was Raygar expecting to find in the Pits, and how did he manage to take control of the most important archaeological site on Lorr?

Hart and Parn Starships

"I'll let my staff know that you kids are free to look around. Just remember: if you break it, you bought it." -- Auditor-General Fiolla, owner, Hart and Parn Starships

We met Fiolla by hologram. She was busy conducting an audit on Daermor, but offered to arrange for us to stay with one of her friends. This angered Captain Solo, who said that he trusted her but not her associates, whatever that meant. Fiolla replied that her friend was a high ranking government official and far more sympathetic towards Han's associates -- I guess she thought we were Rebels too -- than she was. Han finally caved, and the Rebel transport dropped the Shroud off at Hart and Parn Starships.

It was the biggest starship dealership I had ever seen -- ten times the size of Meego's Starship Emporium on Necropolis. Fiolla had explained that it was originally a family landspeeder dealership. She had never wanted to run it herself, but she had invested some of the fortune she made in the Corporate Sector into expanding the business into starship sales. Fiolla also had several full service repair bays constructed, which is where the Shroud would be restored. Since Fiolla is a CSA Auditor-General, she has enough influence to keep the Empire from snooping around and discovering our ship.

Here we met Fiolla's old friend Governor Zenobia le Ingiana of Kinyov. While Uncle Hoole arranged for us to stay with her, Zak and I checked out the starships on the showroom floor. We were admiring a restored R-22 Spearhead fighter, when its targeting system suddenly activated!

Our New Friend

"You know what those slave pits are? The Argazdans were going to have the galaxy's biggest poi fish pond. If the Republic hadn't stepped in, their next project would have been a gargantuan gazebo." -- Kal zet Berri

We thought we had been discovered, until the governor's son Kal climbed out of the cockpit laughing. Kal was not much older than us, had long black hair, and wore a shabby looking military jacket.

Lorrdians are supposed to be incredibly perceptive, and Kal knew right away that Zak and I were from Alderaan. We were annoyed by his joke (it caused us to be escorted from the dealership) but he sounded genuinely regretful at our planet's fate. Kal told us that his own father, one of the governor's previous husbands, had been killed in a speeder accident around the same time. Kal had been in the accident too -- he had a terrible scar on his face -- and had been seeing a doctor for treatment for months.

We shared a common interest in starships. Zak loves anything to do with mechanics, and Kal and I have always wanted to be pilots. Kal said he was studying to enter the Sebs Jemas Flight School in Lorrd City, and even hinted that he might join the Alliance.

I had no idea that he might not be telling the whole truth. [Really, Tash. Is this drama really necessary?]

Crypt of Martyrs

"The practice of owning sentient beings is perpetuated throughout the galaxy. Lorradians of conscience have an obligation to seek out this practice, whatever its guise, and to end it, whatever the cost." -- Salis Kabor, Lorradian revolutionary

With some time to kill before the Shroud was repaired, we began visiting some of Qatamer's historic sites. One of the most important is the Crypt of Martyrs, where Lorradians who have given their lives fighting slavery are laid to rest. Like the Halls of Evidence on Melida/Daan, each tomb has a small holoprojector to play recordings of the dead for the Crypt's few visitors.

All the memorials told inspiring stories of the fight against injustice: the brothers Jemas, who vanished during the Clone Wars, the Serter Market Rebellions, Kabor's Kessel revolts... But there was one I wanted to see more than all the others: the grave of Mari-Elan Nora, the Jedi who led the liberation of Lorr.

A descendant of Lorradians rescued from a lunar slave colony by Jedi Knights, Nora joined the Order and vowed to bring justice to her ancestral home. Though a Sith uprising had shaken the Republic, Nora gained enough support in the Senate to end the Kanz Disorders. The Argazdans fought bitterly to keep their territory and slaves, but the Jedi and Republic soldiers led by Nora proved victorious. Nora later served as the Jedi Watchman for the Kanz sector, until she was killed by slavers on Noremac.

I thought that was the end of the story. But as the biographical hologram faded, another hologram appeared. This time, it was Master Nora herself, and somehow I felt this message was for me alone. She told of the final battle on Lorr, how the Argazdans had fled to the chambers within the Slave Pits...and vanished. The Jedi and other soldiers sent in to flush them out had never returned. Although she could not sense it, Nora believed that something evil lurked in the Pits. Nora had ordered that the Pits be filled in, and their

existence obscured. Whatever was down there, it was enough to spook even a Jedi.

Via: The Glorious Radiance

"Like the ancient Argazdans, we believe in the third tenant of Via: sacrifice. We give up our lives to serve Via...but unlike the Myrialites, we do not force others to do the same." -- Sister Sigil

There are many beautiful places of worship in the galaxy, but the Temple of the Glorious Radiance is not one of them. The temple is an ancient transport ship Via's Aura, grounded for thousands of years and surrounded by portable housing units converted into libraries, alter rooms, dorms, and vestries. The Sisterhood of the Glorious Radiance values function over form.

An elderly sister, Sigil, volunteered to be our guide. She was a member of the Sisterhood who had lived in seclusion for decades. She sounded very old indeed, but the Sisters wear robes and masks among outsiders to hide the scripture tattooed on their bodies. Sigil told us about her religion, which is one of the oldest in the galaxy.

Although unheard of in the Core worlds for nearly twenty thousand years, Vianists still worship the deities once venerated by ancient human societies such as the Zhell and the Seoulians. Vianism was brought to the Kanz sector by a lost colony from the Core, the ancestors of the Argazdans. Before the Disorders, Argazdan missionaries spread Vianism both to Kanz sector natives such as the Sipsk'ud and newer arrivals like the settlers on Lorrd.

At the center of Vianism is a mother goddess, Via in the Argazdan tongue, with two other entities representing aspects of the goddess: the Beatific Countenance and the Glorious Radiance. The Glorious Radiance was of interest to me, as it is described as an energy that radiates from the goddess, connecting her to all life in the galaxy. This sounds like how the Jedi describe the Force, and indeed Sister Sigil explained that her order once had many Force-sensitives.

In the early years of the Argazdan invasion, the Glorious Radiance attracted many Force-sensitives who were unable to be recruited by the Jedi, and it was

this sect that began working against the Argazdans. One of the three major tenets of Via is service to others, by anticipating the needs those around them. At the time, this involved sensing those needs through the Force, but non-Force-sensitive initiates were instead taught to read subtle changes in body languages.

After Governor Myrial's cracked down on Lorrd, the Sisters began teaching this art to outsiders, allowing secret communication among the slaves. The Argazdans suspected the Sisters were up to something, but could not act directly against them, as they were affiliated with the Argazdan religion. Myrial instead ordered them to be relocated to an isolated slave colony on Lorrd II, the planet's largest moon.

During the latter part of the Mandalorian Wars, the rogue Revanchist Jedi raided the colony and freed the slave population. This wasn't done for justice; it was an effort to obtain Lorrdian gemstones. As a form of meditation, the Sisters reportedly imprinted Lorrdian gemstones with the Force. This was said to allow the bearers of the gems to anticipate the actions of sentient beings, and they made excellent lightsaber crystals. Sadly, by this time few Sisters with Force sensitivity remained.

After the planet's liberation almost three hundred years later, the Sisters returned from exile in Deejo's Aura to help Lorrd recover from the occupation. Now Sister Sigil wants to challenge the Empire, just as her order had attempted to thwart the Argazdans years ago.

Growing Rebellion

"If Lorrd does not act, we will become slaves to an empire once more." --
Senator Nee Alavar

Although many Lorrdians have joined the rebellion against the Empire, the Rebel groups on Lorrd itself remain very scattered. The governor explained that Lorrdian Senator Nee Alavar had signed a petition against the Emperor's policies before he assumed the throne. Not long after, Alavar was arrested and brutally executed, and her entire family sentenced to labor camps as an example to others. Those who have joined the Rebellion have generally left the planet to keep their families from also being targeted.

Before his execution, Salis Kabor had attempted to unify the few dissident groups on Lorr with the Alliance, and revive the guerrilla forces that had fought the Argazdan occupation. Sigil was dedicated to these same goals, but she had been isolated for decades and lacked Kabor's Rebel contacts. She was very interested in the Rebels who had brought us to Lorr, but we had no way of contacting them except through Fiolla, who refused to get involved. Nevertheless, meetings between Sigil, the governor, and several interested individuals took place in the mansion over the next few days. The building gave these plotters a sense of security, as it was once a small fortress built for the Argazdan slave masters and it is still more like a stronghold than a household.

Performance Square and the Culture of Lorr

"From the restaurant server who anticipates an imminent need for napkins to the improvisational street performer capable of imitating hundreds of species, Lorradians are capable of responding to your every expression and they are sure to make your visit to Lorr a delight. As long as you don't play sabacc with them, that is." -- Ebenn Q3 Baobab

While these meetings took place, we did our best to keep out of the way. Kal offered to show us around Qatamer, a colorful city with brightly painted buildings that stand out in the sandy plains. The few remaining Argazdan structures, made of sinister looking black stone, stick out like sore thumbs, as did the green-skinned Argazdans I saw. I was surprised that they seemed to get along with the Lorradians but Kal explained that present day Argazdans look back on the Kanz Disorders with shame.

We visited Performance Square, a massive complex devoted to celebrating Lorradian art and entertainment. The 17-level "Square" is actually octagon-shaped, but takes its name from an ancient gathering place in New Shallos razed by the Argazdans. All the levels face an open-air courtyard, and each has many different theaters and performing areas, all with facades representing different types of Lorradian architecture. Performers unable to book the theaters perform wherever they can find space in the courtyard. Kal says it is a prime place to find new talent, and pointed out agents and talent scouts from Coruscant, Adarlon, Per Lupelo, and other worlds.

The recent rediscovery of the Slave Pits has led to a great deal of interest in the landmarks, and several theaters featured shows about them. We enjoyed a performance of Torphceris, a tragedy by the classical Lorradian playwright Pordizet Chatc. The plot is based on the legends surrounding the Slave Pits.

Torphceris was the Argazdan Regent during the end of the Kanz Disorders, and was desperate to retain his power in the face of Republic intervention. In the play he goes against his faith to seek the help of a demon architect, who promises to give him the power to summon a vast, destructive force. Using the Argazdan's slaves on Lorr, the architect builds the Pits, in which she brews a terrible, sinister power.

In this play the Argazdians are not villains, but cowards who surrender their beliefs to hold on to what power they have. Even though this play was written hundreds of years ago, the parallels between the Argazdians and the Empire are clear. Kal said that while this play remained faithful to the text, the actors were using kinetic communication to give their dialogue an additional anti-Imperial edge. In this fashion, Lorradians can express their discontent with the Empire without alerting the Imperial censors.

Even so, the Empire is everywhere. As we were leaving, we saw several Lorradians defacing a newly-installed Imperial vid-palace, tearing down posters that read "Coming Soon: Jungle Flutes". We became separated from Kal in the crowd, and while we waited for him I saw a tall man wearing the garments of an Argazdan slave lord sweep past us. At first I assumed he was one of the actors in costume, but then I recognized him as Dr. Raygar. Both the Argazdians and the Lorradians in the crowd were extremely offended by his attire, and a few spat on his robes as he passed by.

Zak and I decided to follow Raygar and find out who was behind his expedition. We tailed him to a secluded docking bay... where two hulking battle droids waited.

Codename: Diamond

"Those traitors will never suspect that I have infiltrated their council. The rebellion on Lorr will be over before it begins." -- Agent Diamond

Fortunately, the droids seemed to be programmed for combat, not surveillance, and Zak and I hid as Raygar argued with a shadowy figure. Raygar addressed her as Agent Diamond, and reported that he had entered the central pit and would be able to remove the weapon. Diamond replied that his theories had better be correct this time. Raygar stated that both of their tasks must be completed, or neither of them would regain the Emperor's favor.

Diamond was hidden from view, but I could tell she had long black hair and a chilling feminine voice -- a female Imperial spy? She said she had infiltrated the Rebel sympathizers and would soon have all the information needed to expose them. Raygar left, stating that he would claim for the Emperor what had been promised to the ancient Argazdans: a weapon that would shatter the galaxy. [I must object to the false jeopardy and melodramatic suspense at the end of every section. This is an informative essay, not a holodrama.]

A Spy Among Us

"The Empire again? Why am I not surprised?" -- Uncle Hoole

We seem to find Imperial plots wherever we go. Maybe the Force wants us to fight the Empire. Maybe that is why we survived Alderaan. Or maybe we were supposed to die there. That scientist we defeated was interested in me over a year ago. Did he know that Alderaan would be targeted? Did he arrange for our field trip? Will we be haunted by the Empire wherever we go? [Unnecessary speculation. This is an informative essay, not a journal entry.]

Knowing that the Empire was active in the city, we stuck around the governor's residence with Kal. He is a really prime sabacc player -- if we still had allowances, Kal would have cleaned us out. He is quite intelligent, but has a weird sense of humor. Kal and Zak played a trick on Uncle Hoole, which I went along with for some reason. Kal could imitate my voice perfectly, and we both shouted for help from different parts of the mansion. Seeing our usually composed uncle racing around like a crazed Mimbanite was hilarious -- but it was a really immature prank and I never should have let Zak talk me into it.

We had already warned the governor about the spy, but Zak had a disturbing thought: what if Diamond was already here? He had an even crazier notion: Kal was Diamond. They looked similar, Kal had disappeared before we saw

Diamond, he had access to Sigil... I thought the idea was absurd -- after all, Diamond did not sound like Kal... but Zak had just proven that Kal could sound like whoever he wanted. I wanted to prove Zak wrong, so I searched for Kal in the planetary database.

This was tougher than it sounds, as Lorradians have no given names or surnames -- instead, they have a unique combination of names of relatives and ancestors. Some Lorradians have as many as twenty names, and they can go by any of them. In order to search for records on a specific individual, you have to know every one of their names in the correct order.

What I eventually found was disturbing. Kal had no records more than eight months old. I found news stories on the death of Kal's father... but nothing to indicate that anyone else had been with him during the accident. So how did he get that scar?

We decided to keep an eye on Kal, and one night we saw a cloaked figure slip out of his room and through a secret passageway -- an old Argazdan escape route! We followed the tiny, winding passage to a kilometers-long tunnel, where we found a hoversled. Diamond must have taken one to get any farther, so we proceeded slowly down the tunnel for what seemed like hours. Finally, we came into the open air. We were at the bottom of a huge pit -- the Great Slave Pit of Lorr!

We did not have long before we were ambushed by Diamond and Raygar.

The Slave Pits

"With over 25,000 years of computer records alone, the idea that anything -- artifacts, cities, weapons -- has been 'lost' is absurd. In my experience, if something can't be found, it's because someone wanted it that way." -- Dr. Corellia Antilles

We were quickly taken captive by Raygar's battle droids. It turned out we were wrong about the spy. Sister Sigil's robes and elderly voice had concealed a young woman -- Diamond's true identity. She had data tapes of the secret meetings, evidence that would doom the rebels on Lorr. And if we did not act

fast, we too would be turned over to the Empire. Hoping to stall for time, I asked Raygar what this ancient Argazdan weapon was.

He did not know, but he knew where it had come from. Raygar had discovered that the creator of the pits had been found by Argazdan patrols on the very edge of the Redoubt. What they had first taken to be an asteroid was a spacecraft, frozen in some kind of stasis for centuries. The Argazdan scientists were able to revive its pilot, who spent decades in Argazdan custody. The alien learned the Argazdan tongue, though the Redoubt's linguists were unable to figure out the alien's language. Incredibly, the alien claimed to have come from the great void beyond the galaxy's edge.

This alien stated that she was a kind of artisan-scientist, and had been testing a new type of star drive, with a range greater than any her people had known. The drive had malfunctioned, scattering her test ships across the Outer Rim.

This was the figure behind the legends, the demon to which the Argazdans had turned to in desperation, who refused to use any of the technology the Argazdans offered her, and who had sacrificed thousands of slaves to create what lay within the pit.

That weapon, capable of summoning great destructive power, was just beyond a massive door in the center of the pit. Raygar explained that he had figured out the only way to open the door and retrieve what lay beyond.

A human sacrifice.

Death in the Slave Pits

"The symbols on the Deejo tablets call the creator of the Slave Pits 'habensa' -- which in modern Argazdan means 'one who builds', and is considered synonymous with the Basic word architect. Three thousand years ago, however, the term would have had an entirely different meaning: 'one who sculpts', or more specifically 'one who shapes'." -- Dr. Heilan Rotham

Diamond scoffed at the notion, but Raygar was dead set on it, explaining that not only was it necessary, it might also eliminate two mynocks with one bolt. Diamond nodded, saying that Vader would take us dead anyway. Before Zak or

I could do anything, though, Diamond crumpled to the ground -- Raygar had stabbed his own conspirator in the back!

We turned away, not wanting to see what Raygar would do next. Whatever he did, it worked...but I do not think Raygar had expected what happened. Something was awakened. The pit began shaking and rumbling, and we had to run for cover as the floor splintered and cracked. A gargantuan, amphibious form crawled from the center of the pit. The alien monster was over fifteen meters tall -- and it was coming for us!

We were able to escape from Raygar, who fled to his ship. We managed to leave the pit using the hoversled, but we knew that if the monster were to escape the pit, it could level half of Qatamer. Unfortunately, Raygar had thought of this, and launched a thermal detonator to cover his tracks.

We thought we were done for until Kal arrived, piloting an R-22 "borrowed" from Hart and Parn's showroom. We made it away from the explosion in time, but the starfighter was damaged. Kal took it in stride, though, saying that maybe Fiolla would let him buy the fighter now.

We all had explaining to do. Kal's identity was false, but he is no Imperial agent. His real name is Garik Loran, a holodrama actor. His scar is real -- he was recently caught in a crossfire between Rebels and Imperials -- but the rest was a disguise. He did not want the Empire to know he was still alive, so the governor took him in as a favor to his parents. He had confronted Sigil that night, so she had stunned him -- which was why we had seen her near his room. He was glad to hear that, as he put it "Diamond won't be back for the sequel."

The explosion Raygar had been forced to set off vaporized the creature, the pits, and Diamond's tapes. Unless the Emperor believes his stories about giant monsters and aliens from the void, I imagine he will have a hard time getting Imperial funding for future expeditions.

One question remains: was the creature from the Slave Pits the weapon Mari-Elan Nora feared? It certainly reminded me of the Imperial bioengineered creatures we have encountered. But Deevee believed there was another possibility. [At last, credit where credit is due.] Deevee noted the similarities between the layout of the slave pits and ancient radio telescopes. It is possible that the pits were not for breeding weapons, but a system of organic

receivers...or transmitters. Fortunately, the creatures had remained dormant for thousands of years, so the Architect never had a chance use them.

Unless, of course, they were transmitting the whole time.

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[After the adventures on Kiva and Lorr, I believe I've had all the excitement my servos can take. I will be leaving the Shroud when we reach Koaan. As this will be the last assignment you will receive from me, I have seen fit to give this rambling and uneven collection of information a passing grade -- however, you may find your uncle is not as forgiving as I am.]

Report For Wetyin's Colony on Yavin Four: Initial Flyover

To: Commander Deffan
From: Scout Gorsek
Subject: First Impressions

Sir, while I cannot thank the Imperial bureaucracy for the numerous delays and aborted postings Wetyin's Colony has suffered these seven years, I am confident that Yavin system will more than make up for the harassment. There are merely three planets in the system, and I first took these as a bleak prospect, as none is fit for habitation or redeems itself with easy profits from its raw assets.

But the moons of the principal planet are a system in themselves, and offer promise in direct proportion to the dismal planets. Three of the moons at least are habitable, several others look to yield assayable ores for manufacture and sale.

But Sir, it is the green moon that intrigues me. She is an emerald to jewel Wetyin's Colony with verdant fire!

This is the site of the Rebels' boasts, the battlefield on which they claim to have routed the might of the Empire. To be sure, there is debris in her orbit, but I cannot credit cataclysm on a planetary scale. The world looks untouched. As Imperial data-trans said, reports of their demise must be greatly exaggerated.

My scopes register four continents which I have tentatively named Koos, Starloft, Swivven and Wetyin — reserving the last for the greatest landmass, of course — for ease in reporting. All four experience near-perfect weather conditions, and each has several stone ruins which should house colonists until land can be cleared.

I can parcel out homesteads from orbit, if you like.

You will, of course, receive the whole text of the geo-bio assay on our return, but I would recommend some species from my own agricultural expertise. Our ruminants will be better served by grassland than by jungle forage, so I would accelerate the hydroponics program with hard grains and gramma, and hold in reserve the vast majority of embryos to be implanted onworld.

The only exception to this would be the draft bantha for clearing terrain — my life-form readings give no indication of larger predators, and the smaller will not bother hardened adolescents.

The hardware for harnesses will have to be galvanized against the constant moisture, and all organics treated for mold.

Marine equipment will have to be augmented as well, unless I miss my guess, for this moon has nearly three times the open water of that dismal swamp, Betshish. I rejoice now that they found sentience on landing and removed the world from our title. It would have been a pox on our legacy.

Sir, I wish you could see dawn touching this moon with your own eyes — after our persecutions, after our exile, after our long sufferings, the Colony has at last a homeland to rival — and I believe, even to surpass — old Setor. We need never live in fear again.

Of course, provided the Empire grants us the final permits once our exploration reports are complete.

Your servant,
Lile Gorsek

The Might Of The Empire

To: Mon Mothma, Alliance Supreme Commander; other Alliance officers.

From: Major Arhul Hextrophon, Executive Secretary and Master Historian, Alliance High Command.

Regarding: The following Imperial data.

The research you have had my staff and I undertake concerning the events surrounding the Battle of Yavin has uncovered some startling information. I have compiled all of the intercepted communiques, technical readouts, holochips, and datapacks into one report.

Sources for this material include high-level communications, reports by various Imperial agencies, personal data logs, top-secret performance records, and other similar material.

While the information reveals much about the tactics and inner workings of our enemy, I must caution reading too much into this report at this time. None of the information contained herein has been confirmed or documented outside of the data presented here. Unlikely though it is, this could be an elaborate ruse to pass along false information to the Alliance.

I urge you and the rest of Alliance High Command to view this report in the proper perspective. Until collaborated, this report should be considered high level rumors at best. At worst, the Alliance is being fed half truths and lies for some unknown purpose, although I do not believe this to be the case.

No matter, for even in falsehoods can truths be found. And once you have studied this report, I believe that even if you read only between the lines you will uncover much to show you the nature of the Empire and its methods.

Consider this report a companion to our work in progress, *Official History of the Rebellion, Volume One*. We have thus far interviewed and documented the heroes of the Battle of Yavin, including Commander Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia Organa. But unlike that other work, this one — for obvious reasons — is not as well researched and established. The Empire just isn't as cooperative about revealing certain information. Be that as it may, I have included all of the data we have uncovered for the sake of completeness and further study.

When you read through the accompanying data files, you will see the Empire in its glory, its victories, and its failures. You will see its might and its power. You will see its deep, dark shadows that are quickly spreading throughout the Galaxy. And that is why, in the final analysis, I have sent this report to you. If the actual figures and divisions of forces are wrong, the spirit behind them ring true. This report shows the evil that has grown from the rotted corpse of the Old Republic, and that, we have already seen, cannot be exaggerated.

I remain your humble servant,

Major Arhul Hextrophon.

Freedom fighters, they call themselves. But let them be called by their true name—Separatists. For that is the discredited creed they profess, and the bloody cause they champion. Separatists and splittists. Rejectionists and rebels. Sowers of dissent and disorder. All must resist their lures and counter their lies.

—Emperor Palpatine, New Year Fete Week 36: F1: 1

Coruscant Daily NewsFeed: 36:F1:1

New Year Fete Week Launched in Imperial City

IMPERIAL CITY, CORUSCANT -- The festivities of New Year Fete Week were launched in the Imperial capital with a huge parade featuring floats and bands gathered from throughout the Empire. The beginning of the parade was marked by an overhead flyby of 300 TIE fighters, leaving columns of colored smoke and fireworks in their wake.

The Imperial Palace Guards comprised the first display unit, followed by an entire armored division of Imperial walkers and their support troopers from the Imperial Star Destroyer *Death's Head*. Following were a dazzling number of colorful floats representing the stunning variety of cultures and societies under the Imperial banner. Interspersed were more displays of Imperial might, including celebrated units from every branch of the Imperial military.

While all the displays were impressive, the Tion Hegemony's display, three restored war droids from Xim the Despot's fabled vaults, stole the show. This is the first public display of the droids since they burst out of obscurity in a self-destructive rampage on Delalt nearly two years ago.

The parade passed before the Palatial Balcony, from which Emperor Palpatine showed himself from time to time, flanked by Lord Vader and Grand Admiral Takel, as well as other privy councilors, officers and guards. The parade ended in the *Pliada di am Imperium*, the site of the traditional Imperial Fair. Corellia and Corulag are cohosting the Fair displays this year, and will unveil their Grand Display tomorrow. Rumors regarding the secret Grand Display are running wild, and many prognosticators are predicting a re-creation of Cyimarra's Crystal Spires, since it known that both worlds sent delegations to Cyimarra last season.

Colonial News Nets: 36:1:2

Bakura Annexed by Empire

SALIS D'AAR, BAKURA -- As the Bakuran sun rises over the capital city of Salis D'aar today, it shines not upon the chaotic and politically fractured government it has warmed in the past days, but on the newest, albeit modest, gem in the Imperial crown. Early last night, two Imperial Star Destroyers and supporting vessels emerged from hyperspace and quickly neutralized the

planet's feeble defense grid. There was virtually no resistance as troops shuttled planetside and moved to seize strategic assets. There are rumored to have been brief struggles with the Salis D'aar militia, but reports are muddled and contradictory. It has been confirmed now that several troopers fell as they moved to secure the Bakuran Senate, but resistance ceased as soon as the senate members were placed under house arrest. Few local casualties have been reported.

Prime Minister Yeorg Captison appeared on the local holochannels to calm the restive populace and assure the new Imperial citizens that they would come to no harm if they offered no resistance. Captain Brellar of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Onslaught* also made an appearance to welcome Bakura into the fold of the Empire. "Your world, your people, have long been unable to function as a healthy society should," he said. "Your government, the outgrowth of a mere mining corporation, is so torn by internal power struggles that it can barely function, let alone defend its people. We of the Empire strive for balance and harmony in all that we do, and order and rationality above all else. We have come to restore you to your natural place in the galactic balance, and hope you will help us achieve this goal."

The new Imperial governor of Bakura, Wilek Nereus, who was to have arrived with the Imperial vanguard, was detained by Grand Moff Tanniel to work on a short-term independent project, Brellar said. Nereus is expected to take up residency on Bakura within a few weeks, when he will begin the difficult task of supervising the orderly transition of the chaotic Bakuran government into the Imperial mainstream.

In the meantime, Captain Brellar will remain as acting governor of Bakura. His duties will include eliminating the inevitable pockets of resistance, interviewing the heads of all major political bodies and defense organizations, and establishing Imperial garrisons at factories and production centers determined to be of strategic value to the Empire and therefore worthy of protection against attacks by pirates and Rebel operatives.

Human Events Network: 36:1:7

Neile Janna Returns to Adarlon for New Holo

BELRAND, ADARLON -- Actress Neile Janna, once famous throughout the galaxy for her role as the beautiful but deadly pirate queen Carma Dame in the long-running holo saga *Scrivner's Revenge*, has returned to Adarlon to resume her

career after a two-decade self-imposed retirement. In her new holo, she is once again taking on the identity of a half-historical, half-mythical figure. In *Kallea's Hope*, Janna will play Freia Kallea, the trailblazing pioneer of Brentaal space who single-handedly established the Hydian Way hyperlane some 3,000 years ago, and went on to marry into and make dominant one of the great Brentaal House families.

Kallea's Hope is based on the Kallea Cycle, a classical three-part opera revered in the Core Worlds, and is the first attempt in a hundred years to adapt the cycle to a popular format. Some critics wonder if Janna is up to the challenge of taking on the role of Kallea. In traditional opera, it is a demanding and complex role traditionally reserved for the Mistress of the Hall. Since Janna is best known for less demanding roles, the reservations seem well founded.

Imperial Defense Daily: 36:1:13

TIE/x2 Field Trials End: Features to be Phased into New Design

LIANNA, LIANNA METRO -- The final field trials of the TIE/x2 starfighter prototype drew to a close last week as the last of the 32 test units returned to Sienar Fleet System's main facilities on Lianna, along with their teams of maintenance techs, field engineers, and diagnostics droids. The nine-month-long field trials -- placing the prototype fighters in the hands of some of the best active duty TIE wing commanders in the Imperial Fleet -- provided Sienar's TIE Mod Team with an excellent profile of the ship's capabilities and flaws. However, though pilots speak highly of the TIE/x2's performance, the design is not destined for active duty. Instead, like the TIE/x1 field-tested by Lord Darth Vader last year, the prototype will be retired for a new design.

The TIE/x3 is expected to incorporate many of the systems developed and tested on the TIE/x1 and x2, including faster ion engines, the larger, inward-swept solar panels (reconfigured to increase visibility), and improved combat software. The TIE/x3 will be similar in size and outline to the standard TIE starfighter, and will not represent the radical departure from previous hull designs that the TIE/x1 and x2 have. Most significantly, it will not be equipped with hyperdrive engines, as the TIE/x1 and x2 were. The new model is expected to be ready for field testing in about 16 months, and mass production in about three years.

36:1:16/CYN/NAR.4.SHD/TRD

Smugglers' Roster: Random Rumors

Nar Shaddaa Node

Han Solo surfaced on Ord Mantell long enough to really annoy the locals and then faded again. He wasn't running cargo. A regional bounty hunter named Skorr marked Solo, but didn't collar him. We're sure there is more to this whole affair, but our sources had a limited view of the proceedings. By the way, Solo seems to have picked up a new filly, who wears her hair in the Alderaanian High House style and from all reports looks rather like someone who used to lecture Palpatine on morals from the floor of the Imperial Senate. There's a blond kid too, possibly the same guy Jabba's informers saw him with in Mos Eisley. The Wook, of

course, is still first mate. Solo hasn't traveled with this much baggage since that Stars' End thing. What's next, Solo, babies?

Bettle and Jaxa have been busy marketing slug throwers to various warring primitive species in an undisclosed region just beyond the Corporate Sector. Apparently the Ralltiir venture didn't pan out. They've rebounded nicely, though, returning to semi-civilized space with cargo holds bulging with canta salt and havao tabacc. The *Mallixer* is in need of repairs again. Last known heading was Bretta.

Speaking of repairs, Doc and his crew have packed up shop and vanished again. We assume he'll be letting the regulars know where he is in the usual manner when he's open for business again.

Platt Okeefe was wondering if spacers out the Lan Barell way might drop in on the Chyakk clan (the Wookiees, not the Bentora Space people) at the Shullel spaceport and tell them she's found the parts they wanted already. She says she'll be out that way in about two months to drop them off.

Nada Synnt is still Nada Synnt. This must be a record. He just lost his main supplier of black-market repulsorlift components, poor fellow. On the bright side, he has a new ropaji dealer in pocket, and seems to be edging very close to the boundaries of Jabba's patch. Very casual-like.

Lando Calrissian won the coveted taxi-service license rights for Ord Wylan in a sabacc game, and lost them moments later in an idle bet concerning the brand of a liquor his party was consuming.

Though he obviously prefers gambling to shipping cargo these days, he does still dabble in transport. He's heading out to Taanab this season for a bit of under-the-table trading on the rhuum circuit, and says buddies who owe him credits can look him up at Wendle's.

Cynabar's InfoNet

Galactic Resorts: 36:1:21

Annual Regatta Held on Spira

ATARIA ISLAND, SPIRA -- The tropical paradise of Ataria Island on the water world of Spira is once again hosting the annual Regatta Open, the famous marine yacht race which brings together enthusiasts and competitors from around the Empire to participate in a week of competitive racing.

The week of the regatta is one of the best times to vacation on Spira. The Tourist Guild sponsors a large number of festivals during this week, and even those not interested in yachting will find something of interest. Ataria's three *Galaxy*-class playhouses traditionally present their most magnificent works during Regatta Week, and the hundreds of dance halls and concert pavilions feature more high-powered acts than at any other time of the year. For those simply looking for rest and relaxation, Spira's 11,000 kilometers of powdery beaches beckon, and Spira's spectacular underwater reefs offer stunning vistas of beauty to the intrepid and adventurous.

Though the main hotels on Ataria Island have been booked for months, there are still plenty of vacancies on other islands along the Shinkai Abyss and race routes. Daily shuttle hops can whisk you right into the thick of things on Ataria Island, and right back to your secluded atoll when you tire of the festivities.

Galaxy News Service: 36:1:30/GNS/TO7K/BAK.4.SAL/POL

Arrival of Bakuran Governor Disrupted by Rioting

SALIS D'AAR, BAKURA -- Festivities marking the arrival of Wilek Nereus, Bakura's new governor, were disrupted yesterday by outbreaks of violence and rioting at several sites around the planet. Despite the best efforts of the conspirators who engineered the supposedly spontaneous riots, however, damage done was minimal, and the expected mass rebellion never took place.

The rioting began in several downtown areas of prominent Bakuran cities as Governor Nereus was accepting the badges of office from acting governor Captain Alecs Brellar in a ceremony in the Bakuran Senate building (the Bakura

Complex) in Salis D'aar. Imperial troops and local law enforcement officials responded immediately, though due to an early foul-up in communications, several squads would up protecting the wrong areas.

"It was not difficult to determine that the riots were engineered rather than spontaneous uprisings," said Colonel Dreloq, the commander of the Imperial peacekeeping force stationed on Bakura, in a media conference today. "The timing was too perfect, and the targets chosen for destruction were not the obvious ones disgruntled citizens might be expected to gravitate toward, such as military recruiting stations, New Order Party precinct headquarters, or even corporations with well-known Imperial ties. Rather, the rioters targeted factories, holostations, and other sites in the infrastructure, the loss of which would impair the ability of the government to function."

An active investigation has been launched by Dreloq's staff, and numerous citizens involved in the rioting are being interviewed. "Obviously, it's much too early to come to any concrete conclusions," Dreloq said, "but it seems likely at this point, based on some of our interviews, that the conspiracy involves officials at the highest level of the Bakuran government. We'll just have to see." Nereus himself had no comments.

36:2:4/HGN/TRX2/TAN.3.KAM

**Quakes on Kamori Sunder Cities:
"Living Treasure" Dies**

Tandaro, Kamori

Kamori's Zethusian plains were shaken by tremendous quakes this week, which caused serious damage to Jandal, Hyra, and Kimora City, and resulted in several hundred thousand deaths. Direct damage from the quakes all but dismantled the transportation infrastructure in both Hyra and Kimora, and several areas of the three cities are still without running water and power. Further damage was done to outlying coastal areas by tidal waves generated by the quakes. Chamber President Thane Dregond declared the disaster area eligible for government disaster relief, and is petitioning the governor for Imperial relief funds as well.

Among the dead was Glanthe master Dana Dregond (no relation to the chamber president), who was widely regarded as the Glanthe school's master painter in the sector. She was designated 10 years ago as one of Kamori's "living treasures," an honor sparingly accorded to the world's most accomplished masters of the arts.

Hypermedia Galactic News Service

Command Decision

They had left the Core Worlds a dozen jumps ago, setting off across the Outer Rim Territories with its barbarians and non-human monsters and thinly-veiled contempt for the glory and benevolence that was the Empire. Four jumps ago they had left behind even that pale caricature of civilization to enter the sparsely charted region called Wild Space. Now, with this final jump, the Imperial Star Destroyer *Admonitor* had left even that behind.

Ahead of them lay the Unknown Regions. Behind them lay the Empire. And, for all practical purposes, the ruins of their careers.

"Forward sensors reporting, Captain." an officer called from the starboard crew pit. "No signs of spacecraft."

"Acknowledged." Captain Dagon Niriz said, glowering out the bridge viewport at the dull red sun glowing in the near distance. The dying embers of a once glorious star. How very symbolic. "Launch TIE fighter squadron." he ordered. "As per the admiral's orders."

"Yes, sir." There was a footstep beside him. "Well, there it is," General Larr Haverel commented. "Our new tour of duty. Looks so very inviting, doesn't it."

"Looks so very like slow death." Niriz said bluntly.

"Yes." Haverel murmured. "I suppose slow death is just what happens when you come down on the wrong side of Imperial Palace politics."

Niriz nodded sourly. He'd seen it happen himself, time and time again: intrigues and squabbings among the aides and advisors and sycophants of the Imperial court as they forever jockeyed for the Emperor's ear and favor. The tension between two sides could sometimes build for years, then suddenly come to a head and be over in a matter of days or even hours, with the loser and his allies either executed or - if the winners were feeling particularly lenient that day - sent packing off to effective exile on some mudwater world like Abregado or Tatooine.

And the admiral had been right in the middle of the game, so the gossip said, playing it with zest and a certain degree of finesse. To have pulled this exploration/mapping assignment in the Unknown Regions, he must have lost big.

But that was no reason why Niriz and Haverel and the rest of the Admonitor's crew had to lose with him. No reason at all.

Out of the corner of his eye, Niriz saw the officers in the starboard crew pit stiffen, their attention shifting aft. Niriz stayed where he was, watching the dark shapes of the TIE fighters as they realigned into search formation, until he heard the soft footstep on the command walkway behind him. "Admiral." he said, only then turning around.

It was indeed, as he'd surmised, Admiral Thrawn. "Captain." the admiral said in that carefully cultured voice of his. "Report."

"We've arrived, sir." Niriz said shortly, eying him with the mixture of fascination and distaste that had followed Thrawn ever since Captain Voss Parck had found him on some mudwater planet out here in the Unknown Regions and brought him back to the Imperial Court. Basically man-shaped, Thrawn's blue skin and glowing red eyes nevertheless marked him emphatically as an alien. And the Emperor did not like aliens.

Parck should have been disciplined or executed on the spot for that kind of arrogance. The only reason he hadn't been was that Thrawn had apparently turned out to be quite a competent tactician and strategist. He'd been given private Academy training, risen with dramatic speed through the ranks, and ultimately been made a command officer.

The Emperor had tolerated his presence. Why, Niriz would never know. Others in the court - a great many others - had not.

"Yes, I see that," Thrawn said dryly, those glittering eyes shifting momentarily over Niriz's shoulder. "But those fighters should be further out by now. How soon after our arrival did you order them launched,"

"Immediately, sir." Niriz said, striving to keep his voice civil. Whether he liked this assignment or not, he was still an Imperial officer, and he obeyed

orders. "There might have been some trouble with the pre-launch check list - the crews aren't used to dealing with the hyperdrives on these new TIE scouts."

"If so, it's a deficiency they need to correct." Thrawn said. "Launch practice, Captain, beginning now. Please see to it personally."

Niriz ground his teeth. "Yes, sir." he managed, catching the eye of the comm officer. "Call Commander Parck to the bridge."

"Yes, sir." Niriz looked back at Thrawn, a small touch of spiteful satisfaction flickering through him. Parck might not have been disciplined at the time, but Thrawn's enemies hadn't forgotten him. Once the captain of his own Victory-class Star Destroyer, he'd been summarily stripped of that command, demoted to commander, and put aboard the *Admonitor* as Niriz's first officer. Served him right.

The admiral was watching him, an unreadable expression on his alien face. "I gather, Captain, that you don't consider this mission worthwhile."

"No, sir, I don't." Niriz said, lowering his voice out of habit to keep his words from the ears of those in the crew pits. Differences between senior officers were none of the lower ranks' business. "If I may speak freely, I think it's a complete waste of the Empire's time and energy and resources. With reports of unrest cropping up all across the Empire, sending a fully equipped Star Destroyer out here on mapping duty is just plain stupid."

"Perhaps." Thrawn said. If he was offended by Niriz's boldness, his expression didn't show it. "On the other hand, the Empire is a living entity. All living entities must grow if they're to survive."

"There's plenty of room for growth within our own borders." Niriz countered. "There must be hundreds of worlds back there we've hardly even glanced at."

"The Exploration Corps can deal with those." Thrawn said with a hint of disdain. "The Unknown Regions are the future of the Empire, Captain. It's only fitting that the Imperial Fleet lead the way."

Niriz bit down on his tongue. Thrawn was putting a good front on it, he had to give him that. Perhaps he'd even convinced himself that he hadn't in fact lost that last political fight. "Of course." he said aloud. "Sir."

A movement at the archway leading to the aft bridge caught his eye: Commander Parck had arrived. "With your permission, Admiral, I'll start the hangar bay crews on their practice."

"Very good, Captain." Thrawn said, his eyes again on the starscape outside. "Have them concentrate on pre-launch drills for the moment. I don't think we'll be spending more than an hour or two in this system, and I don't want the TIEs caught outside when we're ready to jump."

"Yes, sir." Niriz said. Stepping past the blue-skinned alien, he stalked back down the command walkway, seething quietly to himself. To send the ship's captain to deal personally with TIE fighter crews was almost as demeaning as a public slap in the face. No wonder Thrawn had gotten himself exiled out here. The only mystery was what had taken the Imperial Courtiers so long to do it.

They were on their fifteenth system when they found their first sign of intelligent life. Or rather, when it found them.

"There are three of them, Captain." the sensor officer reported. "About twenty-five meters long - roughly the size of an Oracian customs frigate. Unfamiliar configuration; unknown weaponry."

"Acknowledged." Niriz said, standing on the command walkway with Thrawn and Parck and gazing out at the approaching spacecraft. An alien design, but with the compact and nimble-looking shape of fighters. One squadron of TIE fighters was already on their way out of the hangar bay, with a second standing by. "TIE control: order advance squadron to warn them back."

"Countermand that." Thrawn said before the officer could acknowledge. "Advance squadron is to take up open escort formation ahead of the Admonitor. Comm officer, key external signal to my comlink."

He pulled his comlink cylinder from one of his tunic chest pockets. "I trust you realize those ships out there are probably armed." Niriz warned him.

"Oh, I'm sure they are." Thrawn agreed.

"Then shouldn't we do something about that." Niriz asked, striving for patience.

"We're at full battle alert." Thrawn reminded him. "For now, that should be sufficient." He lifted his comlink and thumbed it on. "Unidentified spacecraft, this is the Alderaanian Colony Ship Admonitor. If you understand, please respond."

He switched off the comlink.

"Colony Ship." Niriz repeated with a frown.

"We're a rather imposing sight." Thrawn pointed out. "I don't want our size to frighten them away."

Niriz looked back at the approaching fighters. Not only did the admiral not want to fight, he didn't even want to worry them. Maybe he'd change his mind when they blew off the command superstructure. "And you're expecting them to understand Basic,"

"They're close enough to Wild Space to have run into traders or smugglers from the Empire." Thrawn said. "If they haven't, I know a couple other languages we can try."

Abruptly, the bridge was filled with noisy static. "Hello, Colony Ship." a wheezing voice said. "I am Creysis, ruler of this system and lord of all I survey. How dare you invade my realm without my permission,"

"More ships." the sensor officer called. "Incoming from around that small moon to portside. Twenty... thirty... thirty-eight of them total. One larger ship, bulk freighter size, falling in behind them."

"Launch second TIE squadron." Niriz ordered. "And have two more squadrons prepped immediately."

"Countermand that." Thrawn said again. "Have advance squadron pull back to tight escort formation."

"Sir, I strongly suggest you reconsider." Niriz said, one hand clenching into a frustrated fist. Did this blue-skinned alien understand nothing about standard tactics? "The whole purpose of a fighter screen is to engage the enemy at a safe distance and force him to disclose his weaponry."

"I'm aware of that, thank you." Thrawn said, his attention clearly on the approaching fleet. "Don't worry, they're not going to attack. Not until they have a better idea of our capabilities."

He switched on his comlink again. "Our apologies, Creysis." he said. "We didn't realize we were intruding. We'll leave at once, of course, as soon as our exploration ships are back aboard."

The static returned. "I accept your apologies." Creysis wheezed. "What exactly is it you seek,"

"A new home for our colonists." Thrawn said. "One which would not intrude on you or anyone else, of course. Would you happen to know of any such worlds,"

"I might." Creysis said. "Perhaps we should meet personally for a discussion."

"That would be most generous of you." Thrawn said. "May I offer the hospitality of the Admonitor for a meeting,"

"As a token of my trust, I will come." the wheezing voice said. "I will have my transport prepared at once."

"I'll look forward to meeting you." Thrawn said. "Farewell." He switched off the comlink and returned it to his chest pocket. "Order two TIEs to remain outside to escort our visitor into the hangar bay," he instructed the fighter control officer. "The rest will return to the hangar bay but remain on alert. All stations will continue at battle readiness."

"Yes, sir."

"Commander Parck, you'll stay here." Thrawn continued. "Captain Niriz, come with me. We have preparations to make before our guests arrive."

Niriz hadn't expected Creysis to be naive enough to board an unknown ship alone, and he was right. When the piercing squeal of the alien gas-drive landing jets finally faded away there were five alien ships resting on the Number 3 hangar bay deck: four of the fighters they'd first encountered forming a square around a smaller one-man craft.

Or rather, a one-alien craft. The being that emerged was large, ungraceful, and - in Niriz's opinion - fairly revolting. His misshapen head was hairless and noseless, with oval eyes that seemed to be set too far apart across its face and a puckering mouth ringed with undulating, worm-like tentacles. From a distance his skin appeared pinkish; close up, Niriz could see that it was in fact a creamy white background covered with a crisscrossing pattern of delicate red lines. He was dressed in a long vest of dark-furred animal skins sewn together in an apparently haphazard pattern. Hanging around his neck on a cord was a bent-teardrop pendant of gold scattered with colored gems; strapped conspicuously at his side was a large hand weapon.

"I am Creysis." he wheezed as he lumbered across the deck toward the Imperials waiting for him. "Which one commands,"

"I do." Thrawn said, taking half a step forward. "I am called Thrawn. This is Captain Niriz, in command of the Admonitor itself."

"Ah." Creysis said, coming to a stop two meters away. For a moment the mouth worms wiggled a little more vigorously, perhaps sampling odors or sounds. "How many colonists have you,"

"Forty thousand." Thrawn said. "Plus seven thousand crewmen who run the ship. Do you know of any planets nearby we might be able to colonize,"

"Not so quickly, red-eyes." Creysis said, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Before talk do you not honor me with a gift,"

"Of course." Thrawn said, signaling to one of the troopers hanging a few meters back. The other stepped forward and handed the admiral a small box. "I see from your pendant that you appreciate beautiful things." Thrawn said, opening the box and lifting out a delicately carved golden sculpture. "Please accept this as a token of our honor toward you."

"It is indeed beautiful." Creysis said, not making a move to take it. "But my wish was for a different gift."

"My apologies." Thrawn said. "Have you any suggestions,"

"One of those." Creysis lifted his right arm, bent tightly, and pointed the elbow toward one of the TIE fighters standing ready.

Thrawn shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't give you one of those." he said. "We have a limited number of exploration ships, and the path we will have to take before we reach our final destination is still very uncertain. If it would soothe your feelings, though, I could offer you a second or even a third sculpture. We have many such items aboard for use as trade goods."

"That will not be necessary." Creysis said. Again the mouth worms wiggled; then, with an elaborate shrug that seemed to start at his hips and run all the way to the top of his shoulders, he stepped forward and plucked the sculpture from Thrawn's hands. "Perhaps when you have settled to your new world you will have an exploration ship to spare me."

"Perhaps." Thrawn said. "Though that would of course depend on how quickly we find such a world."

"Of course." Creysis agreed. "Have you a list of parameters for the world you seek,"

"I shall convene the Council of Colonists immediately." Thrawn said. "I'm sure they'll be able to come up with a proper list."

"Prepare it at your leisure." Creysis said, taking a step back toward his transport. "Make sure it is exactly what you want. When it is ready, you may bring it to me at my command ship." The worms wiggled. "When you come, be certain you are also prepared to strike a bargain."

"What do you mean, a bargain." Niriz asked.

Creysis eyed him. "Do you expect a world for free, white-head," he sniffed, the wheezing taking on an edge of contempt. "If you wish your journey shortened by me, you must pay for the information."

"I understand." Thrawn assured him. "The Council of Colonists will arrive fully prepared to deal with you."

The mouth worms stiffened one last time, then Creysis turned and stalked into his ship. Thrawn motioned the Imperials back; and with another gale blast of gas-drive landing jets, the five alien ships lifted from the deck and made their way out the hangar entry port.

"Evaluation, Captain." Thrawn asked.

"They're obviously primitives." Niriz sniffed, strongly tempted to quote for him the old Imperial dictum that all non-humans were primitives. "Animal-skin clothing, and rather haphazardly put together."

"Yet the seam lines were straight and used a slender thread," Thrawn said. "I'd say the unevenness in the pattern was likely part of the style. Anything else,"

"They don't seem to have repulsorlifts." Niriz said. "But they make up for it in weaponry. I counted at least ten laser barrels on each of those fighters."

"Ten barrels, yes." Thrawn said. "But I suspect no more than two of them were actually lasers. The tips on the other eight looked more suited to projectile weapons or even focused sensors. What about our visitor himself,"

Niriz looked out at the departing alien ships, wanting very much to tell Thrawn that none of this was really very important. But something in the admiral's tone or manner demanded a thoughtful answer. "Very confident." he said. "Arrogant, even. Typical of a barbarian leader, whether he's got anything to back up the bluster or not. You're not seriously going to send a delegation into his ship, are you,"

"He was willing to come here." Thrawn pointed out. "Refusing to reciprocate might be taken as an insult."

Niriz snorted. "I imagine you can guess how much I care about that."

"More to the point, we're here to explore." Thrawn said. "This is our chance to learn more about these people, and perhaps learn something about the immediate area."

Niriz grimaced, but Thrawn was right. "May I recommend, sir, that we at least try to find out what we're up against. We have three sensor-stealthed assault shuttles aboard - let me send one of them around the back of that moon and see how many ships Creysis has."

"If that was actually their main base, that might tell us something." Thrawn agreed. "But it isn't. Tell me, Captain, you've been dealing closely with the Admonitor's TIE pilots for the past few days. Is there anyone in particular you'd consider especially good under fire,"

Niriz frowned, the sudden change in subject throwing him momentarily off track. "Lieutenant Klar's very good." he said. "Excellent pilot, very cool."

"Have him and two other TIE pilots report to my command room in an hour." Thrawn said. "And have General Haverel detail six of his troopers to meet with me at that same time. Same criteria."

Six men especially good under fire. Thrawn's mythical Council of Colonists, undoubtedly. "Yes, sir." Niriz said stiffly. "May I again suggest, Admiral, that this might instead be the time for a show of strength. An assault shuttle with a squad or two of stormtroopers aboard, perhaps, plus a full wing of TIEs to escort them."

"Recommendation noted, Captain." Thrawn nodded. "Carry out your orders."

Niriz clenched his teeth briefly. "Yes, sir." Nodding again, Thrawn turned and headed at a brisk walk toward the archway leading from the hangar bay proper to the cavernous service and maintenance area behind it. The bustling activity seemed to part before him, service techs and engineers stepping respectfully out of his way and, more often than not, staring furtively after him as he passed.

Muttering a curse under his breath, Niriz turned and stalked toward the turbolifts. He didn't like any of this, but service in the Imperial Fleet wasn't something you did if you happened to be in the mood that day. He and the Admonitor had been given an assignment; and if it meant putting up with a capricious alien commander, then they'd just have to put up with him.

At least, for now.

"Three of the alien fighters have appeared from the far side of the moon." the sensor officer called. "Swinging around the shuttle and TIE fighter escort and dropping into an outer escort formation."

"Acknowledged." Thrawn said. "Watch for more of them."

"If they haven't all fallen asleep from boredom." Niriz muttered to General Haverel standing beside him. He and Haverel had supplied the personnel Thrawn had requested well within the admiral's specified one-hour time limit. But then, for some unexplained reason, Thrawn had taken another three hours to get this whole charade moving and out into space.

But now they were finally off. And with the alien fighters forming escort around them, the gamble had begun. With six troopers, a Zeta-class long-range shuttle, and three irreplaceable TIE fighters set out on the betting line.

And along with them, Commander Parck. Niriz gazed out at the distant drive trails of the Imperial ships and the fainter drives of the alien fighters flying beside them, still not believing Thrawn had given such a risky assignment to a man who was supposed to be his friend or at least his ally. But then, perhaps Thrawn didn't see it that way. Alien minds - who really knew how they worked?

"Creysis's command ship has made its appearance." the officer continued. "Also coming from behind the moon. Looks like a hangar bay's opened just behind and beneath the nose."

Pressed tightly against the side of his leg, Niriz's fingertips rubbed restlessly back and forth across the material as he watched Parck's shuttle maneuver into the dark opening. In the past three hours the Admonitor's drift had taken it a considerable distance from Creysis's headquarters moon. If the alien was planning treachery, it would be precious minutes before either the Star Destroyer or its TIE fighters could get there to help.

He'd pointed that out to Thrawn an hour ago, suggesting they at least partially close the gap. The admiral had responded with some nonsense about not spooking them, and had ignored the recommendation.

Just as he'd ignored every other suggestion Niriz had made about this whole operation. Could he really be so reckless or incompetent?

Or could it be that he had some private agenda?

The glow of the Zeta shuttle's drive vanished into the alien hangar bay. "Recall the escort." Thrawn ordered. The officer acknowledged, and a moment later the three TIEs began curving away from , the command ship -

And in that moment, the alien fighters abruptly struck. Abandoning their outer escort formation, they dropped in behind and around the three TIEs, lasers spitting brilliant bolts of red fire.

"Evasive." Niriz snapped. "Helm: all ahead full. Move to intercept."

"Countermand that." Thrawn said. His voice was still calm, but it had taken on a cryogen-whip edge. "All ahead point one."

"Point one." Niriz echoed, spinning to glare at the other. "Admiral -"

"We're supposed to be a colony ship, Captain." Thrawn said. "Colony ships are not designed for rapid acceleration."

"To blazes with that." Niriz snarled, twisting back to look at the beleaguered TIEs. Two of them were ahead of their pursuers, slowly but steadily outdistancing them. But the third had been slower on the uptake and was lagging dangerously behind. "Look behind you." Niriz muttered under his breath toward the other TIE pilots. Surely the other two pilots realized their comrade was in trouble. "Why don't they fire back,"

"Because I gave them orders not to." Thrawn told him coolly. "Helm, all ahead point two."

"You what? Admiral -"

"He's hit." the sensor officer shouted. Niriz spun back to the viewport. The lagging TIE's starboard solar panel had disintegrated in a ball of savage fire, the fighter twisting madly as its pilot fought to bring it under control. He succeeded; but the effort cost him too much speed, and the rest of his inadequate lead. Even as Niriz watched helplessly, three of the pursuing

fighters swarmed around him like a flight of quamilla swooping onto a crippled redjik. There was a multiple flicker of grappling lines, and then the whole group swung around in unison into a tight curve back toward Creysis's command ship.

Niriz swore under his breath, measuring the distance with his eyes. Now that they had their prize, the rest of the alien fighters had broken off their pursuit of the other two TIEs and were also heading back home.

The command ship was also turning to flee; but if Thrawn threw full power to the Admonitor's drive right now, they might still be able to catch the fighters and the crippled TIE before they made it inside...

"Helm, all ahead point two five." Thrawn ordered.

Niriz turned back to face the admiral, raw fury at Thrawn's indifferent bungling battling against the military etiquette instilled in him by four generations of family service to the Fleet. The etiquette won, but just barely. "Admiral Thrawn." he said, his voice almost steady. "I understand your reluctance to reveal our true nature to these aliens. But enough is enough."

Thrawn's glowing eyes might have sparked a little brighter at the word aliens. But when he spoke, his voice was as calm as ever. "Actually, Captain, I don't think you do understand." he said. "The other two TIEs will be returning shortly; please go to the aft bridge comm station and check on their status."

"Admiral, the command ship is moving away." the sensor officer reported. "Thirty-eight fighters have joined it, all of the ships we saw earlier. They're forming into a screened-flight configuration around the command ship."

"What's their speed,"

"One-six-five."

"Helm, bring our speed to one-six-three." Thrawn instructed.

Niriz took a step closer to Thrawn. "What if they jump to lightspeed." he growled.

"We're watching them." Thrawn assured him. "If they jump, we'll have their vector. But I don't think they will." He raised a blue-black eyebrow. "I believe you were to check on the TIE fighters."

In other words, he was dismissed. "Acknowledged, Admiral." he bit out.

Turning, he stalked down the command walkway and through the archway into the aft bridge. He turned toward the comm station -

"A word with you, Captain,"

Niriz turned. General Haverel was standing on the other side of the aft bridge, between the turbolift and the hologram pod. His face was tense with smoldering anger. "What is it, General." Niriz asked, stepping over to him.

"I think you know as well as I do, sir." Haverel said, nodding his head sharply toward the main bridge. "I've got six troopers aboard that shuttle. Six good troopers. Did you know Thrawn insisted that they go there unarmed? No hold-out blasters; not even any knives."

"I didn't know that." Niriz said heavily. "But I can't say I'm surprised. He's trying to maintain the illusion that we're a harmless colony ship."

"Is he." Haverel demanded. "Or this all something else entirely,"

"Such as,"

"Such as maybe he's made a private deal with this Creysis pirate," Haverel said bluntly.

Niriz felt his eyes narrow. "You must be joking."

"Am I." Haverel countered. "Look at the facts. Thrawn agrees to send a contingent to talk to Creysis; but instead of sending it right away, he holds off for three hours. Meanwhile, he has the Zeta shuttle and one of the TIE fighters locked away in the Number Six maintenance area with about fifty techs swarming all over them."

Niriz eyed him, a cold feeling settling into his stomach. He hadn't heard anything about any work being done on the shuttle. "Which TIE was it,"

"Do you have to ask." Haverel said darkly. "The one the aliens grabbed."

Niriz looked forward, at the admiral standing alone on the command walkway with his back to them. The man who had indeed personally arranged all this.

And who was now deliberately allowing the enemy ships to pull ahead of them. "I don't believe he'd betray us." he said, looking back at Haverel. But even to himself the words sounded hollow.

As they obviously did to Haverel, too. "What other option is there." the general demanded scornfully. "He's given them a Zeta shuttle, a TIE fighter - both of them probably loaded to the gills with extra technology - and is now letting them get away. And with eight of our men as prisoners, just as an extra bonus."

Niriz stared at Thrawn's back, the weight of four generations of service denying that such blatant treason was possible from a senior flag officer.

But against that was the weight of the actual evidence. "Why would he do it,"

"Who knows." Haverel rumbled, waving a hand in curt dismissal. "He's an alien. Worse, he's an alien from right here in the Unknown Regions. Maybe he's known this Creysis for years - could be he even set this charade up in advance. That doesn't matter. What matters is what we're going to do about it."

The cold feeling in Niriz's stomach turned to sharp-edged ice. "What do you mean." he asked cautiously.

"You know what I mean, Captain." Haverel said. "I'm saying that the only chance those men out there have is for us to relieve Thrawn of command."

"Or in other words." Niriz said quietly. "you're suggesting mutiny."

A muscle in Haverel's cheek twitched. "I'm suggesting that the Empire and our oaths have been betrayed." he said. "And I'm suggesting that it's our duty to set things right."

"By sedition,"

"The crime has already been committed." Haverel insisted. "And not by us. All we'll be doing is taking the Admonitor back for the Empire."

Niriz looked back at Thrawn again. The weight of four generations of service... "Let's give him a little more time." he said at last. "Maybe he'll - I don't know. Come to his senses."

"It's almost too late for that." Haverel said bitterly. "It's certainly too late for the good men he sent out there to die."

Niriz took a deep breath. "We're warriors of the Imperial Fleet," he reminded Haverel. And reminded himself. "It's our duty to die when the situation requires it."

For a moment the two men gazed at each other. "All right, Captain," Haverel said at last. "You do what you have to. So will I."

Turning, he stalked into the turbolift. He turned around as the door closed, giving Niriz a glimpse of his implacable expression, and then he was gone.

With a tired sigh, Niriz crossed to the comm station. The two TIEs had made it back safely, hangar bay control informed him, and the pilots would be available to talk to him in a few minutes. He waited until they had extricated themselves from their fighters, confirmed that neither was hurt and that neither fighter was damaged, and ordered them to report to debriefing.

He signed off, and for a few minutes more he stayed where he was, thinking about what Haverel had said and fighting a silent battle within himself. But there was really only one decision possible. Turning to the main bridge, he headed back down the command walkway.

It seemed a longer walk than usual before he reached Thrawn's side. "Captain." the admiral said, his voice its usual smoothness. "Report."

"Both TIEs have returned safely." Niriz said, gazing out at the fleeing alien ships. Even in the short time he'd been gone, they'd moved noticeably farther away. "What's the status on Creysis,"

"Unchanged." Thrawn said. "The aliens have increased their speed to one-seven-two. We're maintaining pursuit at one-six-three."

Less than a quarter of what the Admonitor could actually do. "Creysis is probably taking both the shuttle and the TIE fighter apart right now." he said. "I presume you know that."

"Yes."

"Possibly taking Commander Parck and his delegation apart, too."

Thrawn shook his head, an almost imperceptible movement of his head. "No, he won't have harmed them yet. Simple caution dictates that. He won't have taken them far from the shuttle, either."

Niriz frowned. He'd have thought an immediate trip to Creysis's detention center would be in order. "Why do you say that,"

"Because one or more of them could be carrying transmission cameras." Thrawn said. "Until he has a better idea of our technology level, he won't risk letting them see more of his command ship than necessary."

"Perhaps." Niriz said. "On the other hand, between the shuttle and TIE fighter, he can presumably learn all he needs to about us and our technology."

Thrawn nodded. "Presumably."

Niriz stared at that alien face, frustration simmering within him. Here he was, trying desperately to give the admiral every last benefit of the doubt. And yet here was the admiral, admitting with unashamed candor how badly he'd handled this whole operation.

Did he want to be relieved of command?

"What it ultimately comes down to is a simple matter of trust," Thrawn said quietly. "Whether you trust me personally; whether you trust the officers

who approved my promotion to the rank of admiral; whether you trust the Emperor and his decision to place me in command here."

Niriz grimaced. "It would have been easier if you hadn't mentioned that last one."

Thrawn turned to face him; and to Niriz's surprise the admiral smiled. A faint, enigmatic smile, but a smile nonetheless. "Never assume things are necessarily the way they seem, Captain," he said. "Particularly when dealing with the Emperor." The glowing eyes glittered. "Or with me."

Niriz dropped his eyes from that unblinking gaze. Haverel's doubts about Thrawn's loyalty flashed through his mind, along with his own questions about a private agenda. Or perhaps the problem was something more innocent but no less dangerous: that Thrawn had managed to convince himself that the Admonitor's mission was more than just an elaborate and wasteful form of exile.

Or perhaps the Emperor and all those approving officers really had known what they were doing.

But it almost didn't matter. With those four generations of service behind him, there still was only one decision possible.

He looked up again into Thrawn's face. "Admiral, I recommend you call a stormtrooper squad to the bridge," he said. "There could be trouble."

"Yes, I know," Thrawn glanced back over his shoulder. "I believe the trouble has already arrived."

Niriz turned. General Haverel had returned and was marching stolidly toward them, a formation of six black-clad troopers following in his wake.

Halfway down the command walkway the general waved the troopers to a halt and continued on to them alone. "Admiral Thrawn," he said without preamble. "In the name of the Empire, I ask that you relinquish command of the Admonitor to Captain Niriz, and that you allow these troopers to escort you to your quarters."

Niriz looked over Haverel's shoulder at the troopers. Their faces were set in the expressions of men who'd been given orders they agreed with but at the same time found highly unpleasant. Behind them, the officers and crewers in the crew pits were going about their duties, apparently oblivious to what was happening here.

"I see." Thrawn said calmly. "I trust, General, that you've thought this through."

"There are men out there." Haverel said harshly. "My men. I'm not just going to abandon them."

"Your loyalty is admirable." Thrawn said. "How would you propose we rescue them,"

"Perhaps we should try attacking." Haverel said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "An Imperial Star Destroyer is supposed to be pretty good at that."

"That's enough, General." Niriz said.

"No, let him continue." Thrawn said. "All right, general, we go to full power and attack. How long do you think it would take Creysis to kill all of them when he saw us bearing down on him? Or, alternatively, how long would it take him to compute a jump to lightspeed and leave us behind,"

Haverel's cheek twitched again. "Granted, it would be a risk." he said doggedly. "But sitting here doing nothing guarantees their deaths."

"That assumes I am in fact doing nothing." Thrawn said. "But leave that aside a moment. Do you propose to take command of the Admonitor with yourself and six troopers? Or have you polled all 47,000 of the crew to see where they stand,"

"They don't like what's happening any more than I do." Haverel bit out. "Enough of them would fall into line."

"Really." Thrawn shifted his gaze to Niriz. "Would you agree, Captain,"

Niriz braced himself. "No, Admiral." he said. "I don't believe my officers will go along with mutiny." He forced himself to look at Haverel. "Nor will I."

For a long moment no one spoke. "I'm sorry." Haverel said at last. "This is something I have to do." He started to raise his hand -

"Admiral." the sensor officer called from the crew pit. "Eight of the fighters have broken out of formation, heading off on different vectors."

Niriz turned to look out the viewport. He got just a glimpse of the drive trails heading out from Creysis's fleet before the eight fighters jumped to lightspeed. "Do we have jump vectors for all of them." Thrawn asked.

"Yes, sir." the officer replied. "Specter Two signals primary target has gone on vector seventy-one mark five."

Niriz blinked. He hadn't been aware that Thrawn had launched any of their sensor-stealthed assault shuttles. "What are the Specters doing out there." he asked.

"Watching for precisely this moment." Thrawn said, and there was no mistaking the grim satisfaction in his voice. "Comm officer, signal on frequency forty-six. Message: now."

Niriz looked at Haverel, who was looking as confused as he himself felt. "Admiral, if this is some belated attempt to show a little resolve - "

"It's not belated at all, general." Thrawn cut him off. "It's exactly the proper time. I want three platoons of your troopers in the hangar bay in ten minutes. There are two squads of stormtroopers already there - they'll get them into proper position."

Haverel's cheek twitched. "Yes, sir." Turning, waving his troopers on ahead of him, he headed for the aft bridge.

"Your turn, Captain." Thrawn continued. "Order the helm to full power and stand by battle stations." His eyes glittered. "The charade is over. It's time to show them just who and what we really are."

Reflexively, Niriz came to full parade attention. "Acknowledged, Admiral." He raised his voice. "Helm: all ahead full. Sound battle alert."

They'd been sitting on the hangar bay deck for nearly twenty minutes now, ever since the outer hatchway doors had slammed shut behind the shuttle and the aliens had unceremoniously herded them out here, and Parck's legs were starting to feel the strain. Slowly, carefully, he eased them into a different position -

The barrel of a heavy handgun slapped warningly against the side of his head. "You not move." the alien wheezed.

One of the troopers sitting across from Parck stirred, his face darkening as he looked up at the guard. "Patience." Parck murmured, just in case the other was thinking of trying something foolish or desperate. The time for action, Thrawn had told him, would come only after Creysis's people had had time to examine the shuttle and the damaged TIE fighter they'd brought aboard.

From the look of things, that time must be getting close. The shuttle itself had been only cursorily looked at, but the TIE had been practically disassembled. The pilot, Lieutenant Klar, had been over there with the aliens most of the time, a pair of weapons jammed into his ribs as they kept up their running interrogation. From where he sat, Parck couldn't hear either the questions or Klar's answers; he could only hope Thrawn had coached the pilot on what he was or was not to tell them.

Across the way, a door irised open and Creysis stepped into the hangar bay. Parck eyed him as he lumbered toward the group of prisoners, but the alien expression was impossible to read.

The effort turned out to be unnecessary. "Parck." he wheezed, those repulsive mouth tentacles wiggling more than usual. "So you were telling truth. Foolish for you."

"What do you mean." Parck asked.

"Your spacecraft is indeed a po'dorj, ripe for harvest." Creysis said, pointing with his elbow in the direction of the outer hatchway. "Slow and feeble and full of good things. Soon it will be in the grip of the Ebruchi."

"Ah." Parck nodded. "So that's what you call yourselves, is it? The Ebruchi? We'd wondered about that."

The mouth tentacles momentarily stopped their movement. "Do you not hear me, Parck." he demanded. "I say we will take your spacecraft and all you possess."

"With what." Parck snorted. "The ships you have here? Don't be ridiculous."

"All the Ebruchi will soon be here." Creysis snarled, or as close as the alien voice could probably get to a snarl with that chronic wheezing. "Even now messengers have flown to summon them to the kill."

Parck nodded, a warm glow of satisfaction filling him. Satisfaction, and the usual admiration for his commander. Once again, as he had so many times before, Thrawn had anticipated his opponent's moves down to the letter." And what makes you think theAdmonitor will still be here when they arrive." he asked.

"Because even now it continues to chase us." Creysis said. "Foolishly, for it is too slow to catch us. They think to rescue you from the Ebruchi victory feast. Instead, they will lose all."

Parck swallowed. An Ebruchi victory feast. Did that mean what he was afraid it meant? "What sort of feast,"

The gloating alien never got a chance to tell him. From across the room, one of the other Ebruchi suddenly shouted.

Creysis turned and bounded over to him, moving at surprising speed for a creature of his bulk. "What's going on." one of the troopers muttered.

"The admiral must have made his move." Parck murmured back, watching the guards out of the corner of his eye. At the moment their attention was on the animated conversation going on across the hangar bay, but that wasn't going to last much longer. "At a guess, I'd say they suddenly found out just how fast theAdmonitor can really travel."

The trooper glanced up at the guards. "So what are we supposed to do,"

Parck smiled. "Just get ready to duck."

And with a highly gratifying punctuality, the side of the Zeta shuttle directly over the starboard fuel tank blew off.

And into the alien hangar bay swarmed a dozen stormtroopers. The first synchronized blaze of blaster fire took out the guards standing over the seated troopers.

"Klar." Parck shouted, pointing across the room to where the TIE pilot stood beside his disassembled fighter. But Klar had already hit the deck, and the stormtroopers' second volley cleared away the aliens standing dumbfounded over him.

"Commander Parck." one of the storm troopers called.

"We're all here." Parck confirmed, jumping to his feet and nearly falling back down again as fatigued leg muscles tried to cramp up on him. "That doorway's the only exit from the hangar bay."

"Right." the storm trooper said. Six of his men were already moving to take up defense positions at the door, while two others were busily setting explosives to blow the outer hatchway. "Get your men aboard the shuttle."

"You heard him, troopers." Parck called. "Get moving."

"They're coming around, Admiral." Niriz called, peering out the viewport." All thirty of their remaining fighters. Definitely an attack formation."

"Acknowledged, Captain." Thrawn said, coming back forward down the command walkway from his brief private conversation with the comm officer in his crew pit. "Launch one squadron of TIE fighters to intercept."

"Yes, sir." Niriz said, gesturing confirmation of the order to the fighter control officer. "Do you think one squadron will be enough,"

"More than enough." Thrawn assured him. "With those kind of numbers, it's more important for our pilots to be able to keep out of each other's way."

"Even with the aliens fully aware of TIE fighter capabilities,"

Thrawn smiled. "They're not aware of TIE fighter capabilities, Captain. They're aware of Lieutenant Klar's TIE fighter's capabilities. There's a considerable difference."

"Ah." Niriz said, understanding at last. So that was what that mysterious three-hour delay had been about. Rather than loading extra technology aboard Lieutenant Klar's TIE as part of a secret deal with Creysis, as Haverel had feared, Thrawn had instead been removing the critical parts of what was already there.

The TIE formation was nearly to the cloud of incoming enemy fighters, outnumbered three to one by ships four times their size. Unconsciously, Niriz held his breath.

And then the two forces collided, and the TIEs cut through the leading edge of the enemy shock force like a drive exhaust through spun snow. Eleven of the twelve targeted alien fighters were turned to instant fireballs by the Imperials' first salvo, the twelfth lasting just long enough to crab sideways into one of his comrades with a violent crash that took out both ships. The alien attack faltered, their arrogant confidence breaking visibly into sudden confusion. Taking advantage of the hesitation, the TIEs doubled back with review-stand precision, carving an equally devastating slash through the rear of the enemy formation.

"Excellent." Thrawn said approvingly. "My compliments, Captain - your work with the pilots these past few days has been well worthwhile."

"Admiral, we have a Zeta shuttle registering now." the sensor officer called. "Bearing away from the command ship."

"Have the TIE fighters clear an escape path for them." Thrawn ordered. "All turbolaser batteries, engage enemy fighters at will, but leave the command ship untouched. Helm, prepare to jump to lightspeed; target is the first system along course vector seventy-one mark five. Tractor stations, lock on enemy command ship. I want it taken intact."

The sky outside the viewport began to light up with the blaze of the Admonitor's heavy turbolasers, and the already one-sided battle collapsed completely into a rout. Creysis's command ship was trying desperately to escape, zigzagging like a wounded fish as its fighter screen literally

disintegrated around and behind it. But it didn't have anywhere near the Admonitor's speed, and within seconds the Star Destroyer had closed to capture range." Activate tractor beams," Thrawn instructed.

"Activated." the tractor officer reported, gazing at the display over his subordinates' shoulders. "Connection... is good. We have them, sir."

"Reel it in, lieutenant." Thrawn ordered. "Order the troopers in the hangar bay to stand by for boarding. All TIE fighters are to break off and return."

Three tense minutes later, it was done. "Hangar bay reports positive docking lock on the ship, Admiral." the comm officer said. "Stormtroopers have burned through in three places; boarding has begun. All TIE fighters have returned with no casualties."

"Helm,"

"Jump calculated and laid in, sir." the officer replied briskly. "Estimated time to target system is two point five minutes."

"Acknowledged." Thrawn said. "Helm: jump to lightspeed. Fighter control - "

There was the distant rising hum of the hyperdrive, and the stars outside did their familiar surrealistic explosion into starlines. "Fighter control, confirm all TIE wings are ready to launch." Thrawn continued. "Turbolaser crews, double-check battle readiness."

Niriz nodded toward the mottled sky of hyperspace outside. "What are you expecting to find out there." he asked.

"Whoever Creysis answers to, of course." Thrawn said. "Despite his earlier bluster, he's not the ruler of anything. Far less the lord of all he surveys."

Niriz frowned. "Are you sure,"

"Very much so." Thrawn assured him. "A genuine commander would never accept an invitation to board an unknown and possibly dangerous ship.

Nor would he stay in the vicinity so long after imprisoning our vehicles and men, running from us instead of jumping to lightspeed. He was deliberately presenting himself as a target, hoping to force us to reveal the Admonitor's full capabilities."

"Which you of course were clever enough not to give him." Niriz said, grimacing with embarrassment at how badly he'd misread the entire situation.

"Yes." Thrawn said. A simple fact, with no undertone of pride or reproof in his voice. "Creysis is a subordinate. But he's an ambitious subordinate, willing to risk his own life and those of his troops in order to gather as much information as possible before calling the rest of the pack in for the kill."

"All right." Niriz said, forehead wrinkling with concentration. "I understand that. I also understand that it makes sense tactically for us to take the battle directly to their headquarters instead of waiting for them to gather their entire force against us. But Creysis sent out eight fighters, on eight different vectors. How do you know this is the way to their headquarters,"

"It comes down to information again, Captain." Thrawn said, his tone that of an Academy instructor trying to elicit the correct response from a student. "We've established that Creysis is the sort to send all the information his commander will want or need. Not only that he's found a weak and promising target..." He lifted one eyebrow.

And suddenly Niriz got it. "Not only that he's found a promising target." he said, "but hard evidence of just how promising that target is. That sculpture you gave him had a transponder built into it, didn't it,"

"Very good, Captain." Thrawn said, and there was indeed a note of approval in his tone. "Helm,"

"Ninety seconds, Admiral." the officer said.

"Have all stations report in." Thrawn ordered. "Whoever we find here will be in the process of mobilizing to go to Creysis's aid. When we come out of hyperspace, we'll come out fighting."

Ninety seconds later, they did.

The door to his quarters slid open, and Niriz looked up, expecting to see Admiral Thrawn step inside.

It was, instead, Commander Parck. "Do you have a moment, Captain," he asked.

"I'm likely to have a great many moments." Niriz said, suppressing a sigh as he waved the other inside. "Is that what you've come to tell me,"

"Not exactly." Parck said. "Actually, I'm here to tell you that the admiral's turned you down. May I sit down,"

Niriz frowned. "What do you mean, he's turned me down,"

"Exactly that." Parck said, pulling over a chair and sitting down. "He's not accepting your resignation as captain of the Admonitor."

"That's ridiculous." Niriz growled, not sure whether to be relieved or outraged. "I discussed mutiny with another senior officer - that's a court-martial offense. If he's not going to send me back to Coruscant with Haverel, he has to at the very least demote me."

"As you may have noticed, Thrawn doesn't always consider himself bound by the manual." Parck said dryly. "Besides, all you did was talk about it. When the crunch came, you made the command decision to side with him. That's what counts."

"Is it." Niriz demanded. "Fine - so I sided with him this once. What about the next time he pulls one of these stunts? How does he know he'll be able to trust me then,"

Parck favored him with an odd look. "You've got it backwards, Captain." he said. "You're an honorable officer, from a proud Core World family. There's never been any question in Thrawn's mind that he can trust you."

"You could have fooled me." Niriz growled, thinking back to his conversation with Thrawn on the bridge. "If he trusts me so much, why didn't he let me in on what he was doing,"

"Oh, you were proving you were trustworthy, all right." Parck assured him. "But you weren't proving it to Thrawn. You were proving it to yourself."

He turned to gaze in the direction of the Admonitor's bow. "There are tremendous things out there waiting to be discovered, Captain. New species, rich worlds ripe for the taking, and any number of potential threats to the Empire. Our job is to find those threats, identify them... and eliminate them."

He looked back at Niriz. "And that's why we're here. Because Thrawn is the best."

Niriz eyed him. "So you're saying this whole thing really wasn't just the fallout from a political battle."

Parck snorted. "Hardly. I'm sure Thrawn's enemies thought so, but as usual they were at least three steps behind him and the Emperor. No, Thrawn's been wanting to bring the Imperial presence to the Unknown Regions for a long time. His enemies merely provided a convenient excuse for the Emperor to send him here without anyone knowing the real reason behind it. Eventually, depending on how quickly the Emperor can put down all these brush-fire revolts, we'll be getting more ships and men to assist us. Planting bases and garrisons; maybe even a few full-range colonies."

He smiled dreamily, his eyes taking on a distant look. "The Empire is on the move, Captain. And we're the ones who are taking it there."

For a few minutes neither of them spoke. Then, hunching his shoulders briefly as if shaking himself out of a pleasant daydream, Parck stood up. "I suppose we'd best get back to the bridge," he said. "The interrogations of the surviving pirates should be finished soon, and we'll want to be available when the admiral's ready to discuss where we go next."

"Yes." Niriz agreed, getting to his feet with an inner enthusiasm he hadn't felt in years. Yes, his career undoubtedly lay in official ruins back on Coruscant. But that was all right. What faced him now was likely to be considerably more interesting. "After you, Commander."

Galactic Battlegrounds: Battle Of Geddes

"Leia's strike force set out for the stronghold, aiming to recapture the Vor'Na'Tu artifact at any cost. Rumors of Darth Vader spread among the crews, that Vader had been dispatched by the Emperor to retrieve the valuable item. I never put much stock in rumors, but you can never dismiss them completely."

—Wedge Antilles

Around 0 ABY, the Galactic Empire managed to recover the Vor'Na'Tu, an ancient and powerful Jedi artifact on Krant, and shipped it to Geddes, an asteroid orbiting Krant and site of an Imperial research base, where it was stored in a Sith Temple. The Sith Lord Darth Vader went to pick it up.

Later, the Bothan spy Utric Sandov arranged a meeting on Krant with Princess Leia Organa to discuss information that could be vital to the Rebel Alliance. After her crash on the planet, Organa met the exiled Jedi Master Echuu Shen-Jon, who had been hiding there since the Great Jedi Purge. They eventually found Utric Sandov who revealed to them the discovery the Vor'Na'Tu. Shen-Jon and Organa resolved to go to Geddes in order to obtain the artifact.

"I guess your purge wasn't efficient enough, Vader!"

—Echuu Shen-Jon to Darth Vader

Organa and Shen-Jon arrived on-board a transport with a small army—9 Rebel troopers, 3 T1-B hover tanks, and three pummels. Organa also brought her translator, C-3PO, along. During the voyage, rumors spread that Darth Vader was on his way. Shortly after their arrival on the asteroid, Wookiee chieftain Attichitcuk came to the aid of Organa and Shen-Jon. The timely arrival of Attichitcuk and his contingent of Wookiee warriors and war machines proved critical in the battle.

They split their forces, with one group creating a diversion while Shen-Jon and the pummels approached from behind the base. They discovered explosive droids which the research facility had built, and Shen-Jon used his Force powers to convert them for the Rebel's use. Their explosives further disrupted the base, allowing the pummels to break through and destroy the Sith Temple.

Shen-Jon grabbed the Vor'Na'Tu, and the survivors retreated back to the landing zone. But upon returning to their transport they found Darth Vader, who was awaiting their arrival. The Dark Lord demanded that they hand over

the relic to him in order to bring back to his master, Emperor Palpatine. Shen-Jon, fearing the results of the Vor'Na'Tu falling into the Emperor's hands, refused to surrender and shattered the item into four pieces, rendering it useless to Vader. Engaging Vader in a duel, Shen-Jon's skills were no match for the Sith Lord's and eventually Echuu Shen-Jon was killed. But in dueling Vader, he gave Princess Organa enough time to escape.

"When I was a child, I was told the Jedi were a myth, just a story. Echuu Shen-Jon was no myth, these valiant Jedi seemed destined to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of their ideals. But his death was not in vain. The Vor'Na'Tu was now shattered and useless to the Emperor, or so we all thought."

—Wedge Antilles



Better Than Nothing

Platt was worried. She'd had to ditch the *Last Chance* in the Dorajan jungle for repairs. The Imperial picket in orbit wasn't too happy about her leaving without permission — especially with that cargo hold filled with Imperial-issue heavy blasters — and their TIE fighters had done a number on her ion drives' power couplings. And if she didn't get it all fixed soon, that Star Destroyer up there would pinpoint her position and send a heavily-armed someone to collect her.

"SeeVee," Platt called, her voice echoing through the maintenance crawlspace beneath the main crew compartment. She poked her head out of the hole in the starship floor where she had removed the deck plate. "SeeVee! Get over here and bring me the toolbox!"

Somewhere in the bowels of the ship an *asp* droid's voxbox cracked a tinny, "Affirmative." Platt leaned on the deck plates, tapping her fingers. SeeVee slowly walked through the ship, his leg servomotors making a "whrrr-clunk" sound with each step. The smuggler would be the first to admit SeeVee was slow, both in locomotion and processing speed. He was also cheap, and Platt often needed help around the ship, no matter how seemingly simple-minded that help happened to be.

SeeVee "whrrr-clunked" up to the hole created by the missing deck plate and dropped the toolbox to the floor. "Affirmative."

"Thanks," Platt muttered as she began sifting through the toolbox. After finding the power prybar, she withdrew into the access hole, wedging herself into the tight crawl space to rip out a pipe which had impacted the power couplings. When that was out, she began fitting the new coupling into place. "Hey, SeeVee!" she called. "Find me the hydrospanner."

Platt didn't hear the usual "affirmative." But SeeVee clunked around the deckplates enough. When he hadn't produced the hydrospanner — which was sitting right there in the toolbox — Platt started to wonder. She wriggled back out the access conduit and poked her head out through the deckplate hatch. SeeVee was wandering down the corridor to the cockpit.

"SeeVee!" she called. "Come here." The droid obediently turned around and clunked his way back to the access hatch. "I asked you for the hydrospanner," she scolded, tossing tools out of the box. "Why were you heading for the cockpit?"

"Negative," SeeVee replied.

Platt found the spanner at the bottom of the

toolbox. "It's right here," Platt said, holding the hydrospanner for SeeVee to examine. "Don't you know a hydrospanner from the cockpit?"

"Negative."

"What twisted logic programming infests that metal head of yours?" she ranted. "How are you able to identify the toolbox to fetch, but you can't find me the hydrospanner?"

"Negative. Negative."

"Don't you 'negative' me, you rusty old pile of junk," Platt sighed and shook her head. No sense wasting time arguing with the droid. Things would be so much simpler with an astromech droid, even if they *did* tend to get pesky with time.

Platt took the hydrospanner and crouched into the maintenance hole to attach the new power coupling. "You know, SeeVee, you're not at *asp*," Platt called. "You're a trippin' pain!"

"Affirmative."

"Why don't you just go find some cozy corner and switch off?"

"Affirmative."

Stupid droid.



Esselian President Pressured to Step Down in Face of Failing Health

Alabar, Esseles

President Ralle and his Forad Party are being challenged for domination of planetary politics by the up-and-coming Esselian New Order party. Ralle, though revered for his role in leading Esseles through the Clone Wars years ago, is fast aging and his support among voters is being split among ENO and Cardean candidates.

Jamson Freller, the charismatic leader of the ENO, held a press conference this morning, in which he asked Ralle to step down voluntarily.

"While all Esselians are eternally grateful to President Ralle for his leadership in the dark days of the decaying Republic, we feel that, with the restoration of order in the Core Worlds region, his job is done. We urge Ralle to consider retirement, so that he may enjoy his remaining years. He may rest assured that there are many ready and eager to take up his cause, and we of the New Order party are willing to shoulder our share of the burden."

The rumor that Ralle might retire before his term is up has gained ground in the past few weeks, as polling shows the Foradians and Cardeans losing ground to the ENO in parliament. Publicly, the Ralle administration has stated that it has no intention of stepping down midterm, but officials are privately worried about the president's failing health. "We really don't care for the idea of the neos taking over, but if the president's condition worsens, we may have to consider how best we might handle some sort of transition," said one high-ranking Forad official who asked not to be identified.

Many political analysts claim that without Ralle at the helm, the increasingly out-of-touch Forad Party cannot long maintain the coalition which keeps it in power.

By Deena Mipps, Darpa SectorNet

36:2:12/IDD/RAD2/COR.1.IPC/MIL

Storm Commando C.O. Disappears

Imperial City, Coruscant

The Storm Commandos, the elite stormtrooper unit recently formed to combat Rebel guerrillas, have hit an unexpected and unfortunate early snag. While on routine training exercises in the Mid-Rim, Colonel Crix Madine, the unit's commanding officer, disappeared. According to a spokesman for the unit, Madine was leading one of his squads in a wilderness exercise when he vanished in a series of caves. An extensive search was conducted in the cave network by rescue teams, but no sign of the colonel has been found. "We figure he just stumbled into one of the fissures in the caves. Some of them go down for kilometers," the spokesman said.

Madine was preparing his unit for its first assignment when he vanished. Madine, who had taken on the assignment at the Emperor's request, has been replaced by Colonel Jenn Smeel.

Imperial Defense Daily

36:2:17/TRI/H5YT/PAN.3.TAA/MIL

Norulac Pirates' Latest Raid on Taanab Turns to Rout

Pandath, Taanab

The farmers of Taanab have long lived under the shadow of the Norulac pirates, but the constant threat of impending attack may have been permanently banished by the yeoman work of Lando Calrissian, a young merchant captain in seasonal residence in the Taanab system.

When word reached Taanab that the pirates had hit an outgoing rhuum convoy on the system perimeter and were heading sunward, the small orbital defense fleet scrambled to defend the Banthal Company docking array in near orbit, where the massive cargo ships favored by the pirates were docked. According to eyewitnesses, Calrissian, watching the commotion on the holo from the Pandath spaceport bar, boasted he could set the pirates back without too much trouble. When a skeptical fellow free-trader, Gathal Danager, offered him the deed to a small Clendoran brewery to see it done, Calrissian clambered into his freighter amid much cheering and jeering, and lifted off.

Calrissian quickly passed the orbital defense ships assembling around the docking array, and hid in the ice ring orbiting Taanab's moon. When the raiders drew near and began their run on the cargo ships at the docks, he shot several hundred Conner nets into the midst of the pirate fleet. When the pirates slowed their snub ships to extricate themselves from the

entangling webs of the nets, Calrissian tracted dozens of large ice chunks from the ring into their cockpits. He then led the orbit defense fleet in a mop-up session in which he single-handedly managed to destroy 19 of the remaining pirate craft, and went on to cripple the pirates' two supporting corvettes by shattering the dorsal coolant pipes on the engine pods. The ships were later captured with all hands, since Calrissian had also secured the escape pod bays with more Conner nets.

"Gambling is only risky when you don't know the odds," Calrissian said later as he accepted the brewery deed from Danager. "The bet only seemed like a long-shot to those who didn't know I had an auxhold full of C-nets. As it happens, only I knew that."

Daniil Captane, the Taanab portmaster, disagreed. "Captain Calrissian is being overly modest. The maneuvers he demonstrated are the work of a real master, and he showed a real flair for command when he rallied our pilots. He's more than welcome to stay on here and teach my pilots how to fly."

Calrissian seemed pleased at the suggestion, but politely declined the offer. "I'm not much for putting down roots," he said. When asked what he planned to do with his new brewery, Calrissian laughed. "I guess I'd better go see what kind of tinpot factory Danager has foisted off on me. But it can wait a few weeks," he added. "I still have business here that demands my attention." It was unclear whether Calrissian was referring to his business interests or the lovely young lady at his side.

TriNebulon News

36:2:23/IHV/NDR8/DEN/GEN

Plague Hits Dentaal; System Quarantined

Dentaal System Perimeter

An outbreak of the infamous Candorian plague on Dentaal has forced Imperial authorities to erect an immediate blockade around the system. The medical quarantine was erected around the entire system this morning, after experts determined that the mysterious disease which began striking hundreds of thousands of people down late yesterday in Calif City was the Candorian plague.

The plague, an airborne virus, is extremely contagious to Humans, and death is speedy, certain, and painful. The last known strains are thought to have died out 46 years ago when the total loss of the Bandorian colonies gave the virus no means of reproducing itself. There is no known antidote or cure. It is not currently known how the plague took root on Dentaal.

As of this posting, no ship is to enter the system or attempt to depart. Any ship attempting to escape the system will be summarily destroyed by the Imperial interment cruisers to prevent the spread of the plague beyond Dentaal.

Imperial HoloVision

36:2:25/GNS/NDGL/DEN/GEN

Dentaal Ravaged by Outbreak of Candorian Plague

Dentaal System Perimeter

The horror continues to unfold on Dentaal as the Candorian plague continues to take its toll on the helpless populace trapped in the system. Sometime in the first night, death came for the millions of beings who live in Calif City, as they became the first victims of a plague that has not been seen for dozens of years. In the past two days, over 10 billion people have died, as the deadly airborne virus sweeps over the entire Kindelian continent.

Medical authorities from Coruscant, Raithal, and Rhinnal have gathered in a hospital frigate at the fringe of the system to study the plague, and determine whether any of the remaining Dentaalians might be saved. They do not have long to decide, say experts, since Dentaal will be an unpopulated wasteland within two weeks if the plague continues to spread at current rates.

Galaxy News Service

With All These TIEs, Why Did We Win at Yavin?

While the threat of the original Death Star was eliminated by the brave Rebels on Yavin Four, that does not mean that the technology and regime that led to its creation ended. This technical readout is presented to help all of you understand the Death Star's technology and the psychology of those who served upon it. We must assume that the Empire, which so willingly dedicated untold resources to the creation of the first Death Star, would eagerly do so again in order to gain so impressive an instrument of terror and destruction.

— Admiral Ackbar

A young pilot raised his hand as Wedge Antilles paused in his discussion of Imperial starfighter tactics employed at the Battle of Yavin.

"Sir," the young pilot began, "if the Death Star carried so many TIE fighters, how did our side happen to win the battle?"

Wedge smiled, unconsciously brushing his dark hair back with his hand. "That's a good question. To tell you the truth, we won because the Death Star never launched more than a squadron against us."

The room full of pilots gasped and immediately began talking among themselves. Wedge let them carry on for a few minutes, then he called the class back to order.

"From our investigations, it appears that Grand Moff Tarkin never issued an order to launch his TIE fighters. He was content to employ the station's turbolaser towers against the Alliance starfighters. That goes back to our earlier discussion about Imperial overconfidence."

The young pilot raised his hand again. "If Tarkin didn't order the TIEs into space, who did?"

Wedge's eyes leaped nervously around the room before settling back on the young pilot. "The squadron that came after us that day was none other than Lord Darth Vader's personal squadron. It engaged us in the trench,

following after our lead ships and trying to blast them before they could fire at the exhaust port. We may have still won the day if all of the TIEs had taken to space, but it sure would have been a lot more crowded over the Death Star."

Political Intrigue in Bestine

Bothan Spies have reported back to us again about the political intrigue in Bestine...

*** Status report: Tatooine, Bestine ***

Brief History of the Area

It was during the Old Republic that the first colony ships made their way to Tatooine... then simply viewed as the first planet in the tri-planetary system J11.9. The colonists expanded, founding Fort Tusken in the Jundland Wastes far to the north. Both Bestine and Fort Tusken got down to the serious business of ore mining and learned the delicate art of moisture farming - the art of coaxing moisture from the atmosphere for growing crops.

The Fort survived until a group of Sand People attacked it. It was abandoned afterwards, and the Sand People were given the nickname of Tusken Raiders because of the attack.

Current Status

Bestine of current day is a stately gem of Imperial politics. Before the arrival of the Empire, Bestine was primarily a farming and mining community, but it has since become the seat of Imperial power on Tatooine. As a result, Bestine is now the most cosmopolitan and cultured Tatooine settlement.

Due largely to the influx of Imperial personnel and their credits, Bestine is flourishing while other Tatooine cities struggle. Bestine has transformed from a modest agrarian township into a thriving economic hub. While Mos Eisley is a magnet for smugglers and their ilk, Bestine attracts honest traders and merchants interested in doing legitimate business. Bestine is also the safest of all the Tatooine cities. Imperial Stormtroopers patrol the streets protecting the local populace from common thugs as well as from Tusken Raiders. Bestine could be considered the capital of Tatooine, at least by Imperial standards.

Recently, a political struggle in Bestine has arisen between a powerful merchant and an ambitious Imperial officer. Two young men struggling to climb the ladder of power while maintaining a fragile balance between the long established Bestine merchants and the Imperial garrison. The balance is shrouded by an important trade agreement between their superiors, so neither politician wants to upset their superiors, the local economy or the attitudes of the Empire, so both of the ambitious young men are working to maintain their positions under Governor Tour Aryon in the hopes of influencing their causes. Their goals are simple: influence the great many space travelers who pass through Bestine in hopes of being elected and thus getting in the good graces of Governor Aryon.



Imperial Communicate #87341.36a

To: His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Palpatine
From: Major Herrit, Imperial Intelligence
Regarding: Luke Skywalker, Wanted For Crimes Against
the Empire

Your Imperial Majesty:

Here is the information you requested concerning the Rebel operative known as Luke Skywalker.

Currently, Skywalker is wanted for the following crimes: high treason, espionage, conspiracy, breaking into a top secret Imperial facility, liberating a known criminal, breaking out of a top secret Imperial facility, and destruction of Imperial property (see Imperial File #634191.58f). His involvement in the Tatooine and Yavin affairs are enough to warrant his execution, but his actions against the Empire have not stopped with his part in the destruction of the Death Star. Since that time there have been not less than three separate Rebel incidences in which Skywalker played a major role (see Imperial Files #783440.91a through .91f).

Skywalker is 1.72 meters tall, with a medium build and blonde hair. He is a young male, barely out of his teens, who appears to have worked on a farm prior to his Rebel activities (but that could be a cover story; see Imperial File #312485.34a). Some of our sources suggest that Skywalker was part of a Rebel cell on Tatooine, under the command of Jedi fugitive Obi-Wan Kenobi (see Imperial File #312485.36cc), but this has not been confirmed.

This Rebel has shown exceptional piloting and star-fighting abilities, and all indications are that it was his shot that destroyed the Death Star. He has also been seen wielding a lightsaber.

Lord Vader insists that Skywalker is strong with the Force. As we do not know what the Force is, our agents have no way to test this. Requests to Lord Vader to describe the Force have been refused. (I must once again respectfully request that you tell Lord Vader to stop killing my agents. The Empire has put a lot of time and money into their training. If he doesn't want to talk to them, can't the man just say no like anybody else?)

Luke Skywalker is frequently accompanied by a Correllian smuggler named Han Solo, a Wookiee called Chewbacca, an astromech and a protocol Droid (model numbers unknown), and the traitorous Princess Leia Organa. There seems to be a strong tie among these individuals, and they have been known to engage in dangerous activity to aid one another. For more information see Imperial Files 13474.8c, 469140.33j, and 067431.47h.



Imperial Communique #44582.15k

To: His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Palpatine
From: Major Herrit, Imperial Intelligence
Regarding: Princess Leia Organa, Wanted For Crimes
Against the Empire

Your Majesty:

Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan, once a member of the now-disbanded Imperial Senate, has long been an opponent of your New Order. It is now evident that she is indeed more than just a vocal supporter of the hated Rebellion. With the recent events at Tatooine and Yavin, we have gathered sufficient proof to name her as a vital member and leader within the Alliance.

Lord Vader and his men traced the stolen plans for the Death Star to a consular ship registered to Alderaan. They intercepted the vessel and captured Princess Leia, the highest ranking official upon the ship, but the plans were no longer in her possession. Having sufficient evidence to link her activities with known Rebel actions, Lord Vader transferred her to the Death Star, where he questioned her thoroughly. However, it is evident that the Princess is amazingly strong-willed, extremely resistant to modern interrogation techniques. Even when Grand Moff Tarkin threatened to destroy her homeworld, the Princess only pretended to give in, and instead of providing the location of the Rebel base, gave him the coordinates of one which had been deserted for some time. With the help of several other noted Rebels, the Princess subsequently escaped from the Death Star (see Imperial Communique #87341.36a).

Her connection to the Rebel cell made up of Obi-Wan Kenobi (now deceased), Luke Skywalker, and Han Solo established, it has since been discovered that she serves as a leader in the so-called Alliance, where she uses her charismatic gifts to inspire many young men and women to treason. We will gain a significant victory when we capture the Princess. Without her presence, many Rebels will simply lose interest and fade away. (And it is a sure bet that wherever she is, Skywalker and Solo will not be far away.)

For additional information see Imperial Files 13474.8c, 469140.33j, 067431.47h, and 457300.2s.

36:3:5/TRI/H5YT/GRO.5.GRO/MIL

**Empire Smashes Batiiv Pirate Menace
Grovner, Ord Grovner**

The Imperial Star Destroyers *Bombard* and *Crusader* limped back to Ord Grovner Naval Base this week after dealing a death-blow to the arrogant and once-almighty Eyttyrmin Pirates of the Khuiumin system. The two destroyers were dispatched by Admiral Freeda last week to destroy the pirate menace. The murderous rogues chose to stand and fight rather than abandon their base, confident in their ability to hold the system.

Though the pirate armada, consisting of over

150 ships, boasted ample firepower to pose a serious threat to two *Victory*-class destroyers, superior Imperial tactics and training carried the day in the end. The three-day battle ranged across the entire Khuiumin system, and culminated in the destruction of the pirate base itself. Of the 8,000 or so pirates who entered the fray, less than 272 survived, and their fleet was utterly destroyed. Imperial losses were light, but the two aging destroyers sustained significant structural damage in the conflict.

TriNebulon News

Team Recovery

“...Your instructions are to jump directly to the Radra system. Once in-system you will proceed to Radra IV, where you will discharge your cargo at the planet’s only port facility. From there you will go to a secret Alliance surveillance post which is concealed in a mountainous, unpopulated part of the planet. We believe the post is threatened by Imperial forces. You are to land in the post’s shuttle bay and remove the team and its sensor equipment. It is possible that your approach to the post will be monitored by Imperials or other authorities, so you must get in and get out fast. But remember, the post contains valuable and difficult-to-get military passive sensor gear. You must bring it out if you can. The team is expecting you and has begun dismantling the equipment. An interstellar shuttle that is commonly used in the Radra system has been provided. It contains a legitimate cargo of medical supplies, so you should have no problems going in. You have the post’s coordinates and identifying codelines. May the Force be with you coming out. Are there any questions before you embark?”

The Bloodstripe

The following textfile is an excerpt from the transcript of an oral history compiled a few years ago by Professor Emeritus Skynx, at the University of Ruuria. The subject is Aleksandr "Trooper" Badure, a former instructor at the Republic/Imperial Military Academy, as well as a long-time military veteran (his tours of duty included the Twi'lek Spice Conflict, the Corellian Territories Engagements and the Outer Rim Wars).

Corellians have always had reputation of doing things just a little bit differently. Some say they invented hyperdrive just because they were tired of going sublight like everyone else. I'd take that with a pinch of mytag crystal, but you get the point.

That individuality even includes honoring their heroes. It comes from their idea of courage. They don't see it as jumping through hoops with blaster rifles firing at you. They see it as moral conviction.

You see, anybody can run over a trench to take out an enemy position. That, to them, is instinct. It's not anything you can think about — you never get the time.

The way Corellians see it, it takes more real courage to do something you can contemplate. Especially if it's unpleasant to you personally. Now nobody, or at least very few people, likes seeing strangers come to grief, so it's not a big trade-off to help them out. But, if you're standing up for what you believe in and you *know* it's gonna hurt, then that's a hero.

While other worlds bestow medals or ribbons to award courage, the Corellians, always a practical people, prefer a no-nonsense approach over shiny bits of ceramic or cloth. Sure, they've got good citizenship prizes, but the important one, the real thing, is a special mark so others will always know they can *depend* on the person.

What they do is award something they call the Bloodstripe. It's a three-centimeter wide broken stripe of piping sewn on a seam on the trousers.

They have two classes of it. The Second Class is a broken gold stripe. First Class is a broken red stripe. It's pretty difficult to get the Second Class to begin with, and the First Class is usually posthumous.

As I said, it isn't for flashy things, so you can't automatically assume that anyone wearing it is a galactic hero or something. Of course, warfare is just about the hardest thing you can do, so 999 out of every 1,000 are for courage under fire.

You wear it as much as you choose, as often as you like, but it's a commitment. It says, "I stand for something, a code, a belief system, something. And I honor my debts."

Many people take a Corellian Bloodstripe to indicate a high and mighty attitude, like a Jedi Knight or someone from Freedom's Sons. That's wrong. Someone with a Bloodstripe is still human, still makes mistakes, and that Bloodstripe doesn't automatically make him your friend. You don't walk up to a complete stranger with the 'Stripe and suddenly think he or she owes you anything more than the time of day. But it does say they have proven themselves before ... and can do so again.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine. We go back a long way, Han Solo and I. Now he's a fine example to look at. You remember him back on Dellalt in the Tion?

Corellians like their privacy as well, and he told me how he got the First Class on condition it not become public knowledge, and I respect that. If you want to know it, you ask him yourself, but I will let on about this: the Second one had to do with a Wookiee.

Han Solo hasn't chosen to wear the First class in a while. After all, a high profile in his line of work can be deadly, and in the right quarters, a Bloodstripe is about as high profile as it gets. I once heard he almost made the Final Jump after some bounty identified him by it.

Now that he's some famous Rebel, some act surprised he came from such a "lowly" background. Me, I always knew he'd go far.

The Shaman's Staff

Following up a hot tip that promised lots of credits, you travel to Endor to find King Terak. He's the leader of the Marauders, a nasty group of local thugs. Terak is over two meters tall and carries a massive machete.

'Scholar Szingo tells me you are worthy of trust, but you look like a weak willed, oafish lout, used to failing in your duties,' says Terak with a growl. 'We will find the value of appearance. You are to locate an Ewok holy man, destroy him, and return here with a staff I am told contains the power.'

You nod, waiting for him to go on. He says, 'A patrol was ambushed near the borders of our territory. The leader of the patrol claims a solitary Ewok was able to send his men running in confusion with bolts of pure power shot from a shiny metal staff. Retrace the steps of this patrol, locate the Ewok, and return here with the staff he wields. Now go!'

You have no idea what this staff might be, but his credits are good. More asking around reveals that Logray is the name of this holy man, and he lives in Bright Tree Village.

Approaching as quietly as you can, you get about 50 meters from the village when you find yourself surrounded by a dozen Ewoks. They begin babbling in their native language and poking you with their sticks.

Then an Ewok elder covered in feathers, beads, and skulls comes your way. He brandishes a staff that must be the one you seek. All the other Ewoks bow down when he arrives.

He says a few things that you don't understand. With a heavy sigh, you realize that there's only one way to accomplish your task at this point. You draw your weapon and attack.

The furry little beasts are tenacious fighters, and there are very many of them. A blow from your weapon knocks down the shaman Logray. His staff clatters away, out of reach.

You leap for the staff and grab it. Then it's time to hightail it back to Terak. The Ewoks, having defended their village, show no interest in following you at this point.

You present the staff with pride to King Terak. 'This is the staff? This? It looks just like a simple metal staff. It IS a simple metal staff!'

'I guess the magic is in the shaman, not the staff,' you say. 'Either way, this is when I get paid.'

Utinni!

They don't order drinks.' That was Wuher's answer for anyone who questioned his 'no droids' policy at the Mos Eisley Cantina. The grizzled bartender even went to the expense of installing a Fabritech EPT-12 droid detector at the entrance. Most patrons were pleased with the lack of droids in the establishment. The prying optical receptors of Imperial security droids were not allowed, encouraging a steady flow of illegal credits and shady deals.

Dathcha was a Jawa trader and adventurer trying to make a name for himself. He had dreams of exploring the galaxy someday. He didn't like Wuher's 'no droids' policy, since his stock and trade was dealing in used droids. In a daring midnight raid, he stole Wuher's droid detector.

'That's what I'm telling you,' says Wuher. 'It was that one they call Dathcha. Find him and get my droid detector back!' The crowd moans as another protocol droid walks through the door. 'By the Emperor's black heart! There's another one!'

Finding a particular Jawa in the Dune Sea is no easy matter. After a long day of searching through sandcrawlers, you find the Jawa trader known as Dathcha. 'Wuher wants his EPT-12 back,' you tell him. 'I'm not leaving here without it!'

'A beton nya mombay m'bwa!' says the Jawa. 'This is mine, all mine!' says your translating datapad. Dathcha has already drawn his ion blaster. 'Hkeek nkulla,' he says, and your datapad can't translate it. The way Datcha spits out those words, you're sure it's a curse.

There is only one way to settle this.

The plucky Jawa trader is finally knocked unconscious. You think for a moment about finishing him off. Then your basic good nature takes over, and you just pick up the droid detector and make your way back to Mos Eisley.

When you get to the cantina, there's a roar from inside. Droids are everywhere — protocol droids, astromechs, assassin droids, every model and shape. Fights

are breaking out all over the place. You hold the droid detector over your head and Wuher sees you. He fights his way through the crowd and plugs it in immediately. 'No droids!' he yells, as the detector starts blinking and beeping. 'Get these bolt buckets out of here!'

'Thank the stars! You saved my cantina!' says Wuher. 'Your drinks are free here anytime, day or night.'

Singing Mountain Assault

'There's a Nightsister witch roaming the edge of the forest with her rancor,' says the storyteller. 'She's looking for someone to teach those Singing Mountain girls a lesson!' This elicits much laughter from everyone around.

Hungry for credits, fame, and fortune, you decide to see if the story is true. It's not hard to find a Nightsister riding a rancor, and when she sees you, she jumps down to greet you.

'So he spread my tale of woe and found someone to help!' says the Nightsister. 'I am Nandina, recently released from a banishment chamber with my pet here, Gorvo,' she says. 'I hunger for revenge, and you can help me.'

'As long as the money's good,' you reply.

'Don't worry, you'll be richly rewarded,' says Nandina with a wave of her hand. 'I want you to go to Singing Mountain and find the Arch Witch Azzenaj. I've always hated her and now it's time to settle the score.'

The next day, you're approaching Singing Mountain village with the instructions Nandina gave you. One of the Singing Sisters comes out to meet you. 'It is I for whom you search,' she says. You check the datapad image and yes, this is Azzenaj herself. 'The seers of Singing Mountain have foretold it.'

'I didn't come here to talk,' you say. 'I came here to kill you.'

Azenaj smiles slightly. 'You came to try.'

The Force powers of the Singing Mountain Clan witches make them formidable opponents, and Azzenaj is one of the most powerful of all. When she finally falls in battle, you take her elaborate jewelry as a prize.

Nandina is excited when you greet her. 'Did you defeat the Arch Witch?' she asks.

You throw the jewelry of Azzenaj on the ground before her saying, 'Does that answer your question?'

Nightsister Round-up

Through a series of contacts, you discover that the Singing Mountain Clan elders are looking for someone to take on a special mission. Traveling to Dathomir, you meet with Arch Witch Azzenaj.

'The Sisters are the only force on Dathomir that keeps the Nightsisters in check,' she says.

'One of the evil witches has become a serious threat,' continues Azzenaj. The Nightsister called Nandina escaped from the chamber of banishment. She was responsible for a recent attempt on my life, but I used the Force to mask my life signs so that her assassin thought I had perished.'

'Nandina roams Dathomir with her pet rancor Gorvo on a roaring rampage of revenge,' says the Arch Witch. 'You must return Nandina to the chamber of banishment.'

You leave Azzenaj to search for Nandina. You're visiting the Science Outpost when someone runs in screaming, 'The witch and her beast destroyed everything!' When it's determined that the hysterical citizen is from a nearby camp, you head in that direction.

When you arrive, Nandina is riding her rancor and the beast is throwing a swoop into a building with a huge crash. Bodies litter the ground.

'Nandina!' you shout. Her head whips around and her eyes glare. 'I come from Singing Mountain to banish you!'

'The Arch Witch is dead!' she cries. They have no leader!'

'Azzenaj lives,' you say. 'She deceived your assassin with the Force.'

'Nooo!' cries Nandina, in a rage. She spurs her rancor to attack.

Her rage finally spent, Nandina collapses to the ground in defeat. You have no trouble returning her and her rancor pet to the chamber of banishment, where Azzenaj meets you.

'You have performed a valuable service,' she says.

CHAMPIONS OF THE FORCE

When a landspeeder crashes in a remote part of Dantooine, a hidden cache of Jedi artifacts is found. One of them is a broken holocron called the Codex of Tython. Recording thousands of years of technological accomplishments, several missing fragments will make it operational again. This priceless find will become a boon for the Rebel Alliance or a weapon for domination by the Galactic Empire.

Light Side Campaign: Constructing the Codex

You've found the Codex of Tython on Dantooine, but now you have to find the fragments to complete it. It's an important resource for the Rebel Alliance, and now it's up to you to complete this important mission.

Scenario 1: Escape from Dantooine! Ambushed by a squad of stormtroopers, you must fight your way to the spaceport.

As you emerge from the dark chamber of relics beneath the surface of Dantooine, the sunlight stings your eyes. Carrying the Codex of Tython wrapped in a tarp, you eye the horizon. It seems that no one was aware of the crash of your landspeeder in this remote location. Warily, you start the long trek back to the spaceport.

After a day's travel, you're making good progress. That night, you're surprised by the sounds of something approaching. Hoping it's an animal, you hear

instead the metallic voice of a stormtrooper's comlink. 'The perimeter is secured, sir.'

An Imperial officer steps forth from the growing circle of white-armored soldiers. 'I am Captain Adrick, servant of the Empire.' A slight nod and a wry smile betray his confidence. 'We detected the crash of your speeder in a routine patrol. We found the cache, but it was empty.' His demeanor becomes intense as he barks out his demands. 'You have something I want. I intend to take it. Give it to me now, and we'll let you go.'

Standing to your feet, you gather the Codex in one hand. 'I have no love for the Empire,' you begin. 'And no reason to believe you'll let me leave alive, whether I do what you say or not.' You draw your weapon, ready to fight. 'If you want this, you'll have to kill me first.'

Adrick actually sighs a little and says quietly, 'Very well, if that's what you want.' Then he gives a simple order to his troops: 'Kill this fool. Take the relic.'

The troopers of Captain Adrick were many, but their poor training and lack of motivation were no match for your courage. They seemed to lose track of you, and you were able to make your escape into the night.

Soon, you meet a lone woman on the road. You are somewhat startled, having not noticed her approach. She is a Zabrak, and dressed in simple brown robes. She raises her hand in peace before speaking. 'I am Drakka Judarrl. I helped you escape. Please let me speak with you.' She seems sincere, and you immediately trust her. You put away your weapon and allow her to speak.

'I am a Jedi. I clouded the minds of those Imperials to allow you to get away. Then she asks, 'Did you find the Codex? My father searched for it for many years. I have a fragment myself.' She holds a small crystal in her hand. 'Here, let me show you.'

Drakka takes the Codex and inserts the crystal into one of its many sockets. An image activates on the surface of the holocron. It shows a Zabrak, a Dark Jedi by the look of him. 'His name is Mellichae,' she begins. 'The image shows him on Dathomir. You must go there to find another codex fragment. You must complete the Codex and return it to the Alliance.'

Scenario 2: The Sith Shadows Your next destination is Dathomir to question Mellichae, the Dark Jedi held prisoner there, to find another holocron fragment.

Arriving on Dathomir, you go to the village of Aurilia, where the Dark Jedi you seek is reported to be held prisoner. Captain Sarguillo, the Zabrak with a long history of defending the town, has only bad news.

'Stormtroopers attacked the jail two nights ago. Mellichae made good his escape,' says Sarguillo, through clenched teeth. 'It was my job to hold him here, and I've failed.'

He takes a deep breath and continues. 'I believe he is in one of the caves to the north.' He points to a local map on the wall. 'I must remain in Aurilia to keep the peace, but I can deputize you to bring Mellichae back. He's probably rejoined those armed thugs, the Sith Shadows.'

You tell the Captain, 'Don't worry, we'll have this Dark Jedi back in custody soon.' You give Sarguillo a hearty handshake and leave on your mission.

Climbing into the hills, you find the coordinates supplied by Sarguillo. You find humanoid tracks. Examining the cave with your electrobinoculars, you detect no activity.

Then a Zabrak with a cybernetic arm shows himself - the Dark Jedi you seek. Behind him are several cloaked figures, most certainly some of his Sith Shadows.

Arming yourself, you step forward. 'Mellichae! I come here as a deputized agent of Captain Sarguillo,' you announce. 'I am here to return you to custody!'

Mellichae says, 'I have had enough of the good Captain's hospitality.' The forest is so quiet you can hear the whine of his mechanical arm. 'I dispatched Adrick's troopers, and you are next.' He ignites his lightsaber.

Without warning, the Dark Jedi leaps toward you to attack. At the same time, his Sith Shadows begin firing their blasters. The most difficult part of your task has just begun.

The clearing outside the cave is littered with the fallen bodies of the Sith Shadows. Mellichae is disarmed, and you have placed him in shackles. 'You and I have some special business' you say to the defeated Dark Jedi. 'You have a fragment of the Codex of Tython, and I need to recover it.'

"Do you expect me to help you find it?" asks Mellichae bitterly.

"I'm learning more each day about how to operate this holocron," you reply, taking the Codex from your backpack. As you hold the device in both hands, images flicker on its surface. The Zabrak's eyes widen as he sees it. 'Sometimes, I think it's talking to me.'

Walking toward the cave, the images begin to slow. Among the crates and containers inside, the Codex starts to glow. You find one spot that glows most brightly, accompanied by a steady hum. You blast open the container and find the fragment within.

Installing this shard into the Codex, you see a vision appear on the new fragment. It shows a woman riding a Rancor beast, and you recognize her as one of the Witches of Dathomir.

Scenario 3: Nightsisters You discover that Axkva Min, one of the Witches of Dathomir, has been locked away in the Chamber of Banishment and she has another Codex fragment.

Captain Sarguillo greets you with congratulations. The Dark Jedi Mellichae is again an unwilling guest of Aurilia. Without mentioning the Codex, you show the Captain your image of the Dathomir witch.

Sarguillo puts a hand to his chin in thought. 'That is Axkva Min, queen of the Nightsisters,' he begins, using the other name for the Force-sensitive witches. 'She is imprisoned in a Chamber of Banishment. Getting to her will be difficult. You'll need a key to enter the Nightsister stronghold.' He provides you with the Key of Exile you need.

Days later, you travel through cavernous chambers to cross a bridge and reach the Chamber of Banishment. Weapon drawn, you cautiously enter. You find several Nightsisters guarding a large crystal which contains the essence of Axkva Min trapped within. 'Begone, interloper,' says one of the Nightsisters to you.

'Axxva Min has something I need. I must speak with her.' You take the Codex out of your backpack.

'She is imprisoned for a reason,' says another Nightsister. 'We are here to make sure she remains so.'

'It seems we are at cross purposes,' you say, watching the Codex vibrate and glow.

'Then you will die here,' says one of the Witches.

A bolt of energy suddenly arcs from the Codex to the crystal. With a crash, the crystal is destroyed, and the shimmering form of Axxva Min takes shape. Her eyes fill with malevolence as she ignites her lightsaber. 'Who dares awaken me?'

You must now defeat the Nightsisters and their Queen together to get the next holocron fragment.

Her Nightsister warders defeated, Axxva Min kneels before you. 'You have released me, but humbled me in defeat. Take my life, it is yours.' She spreads her hands wide and bows her head, expecting a final stroke to dispatch her. 'A preferable fate to eternal imprisonment.'

You put away your weapon, holding the Codex in your other hand. You approach the Nightsister Queen, and lift her head to face you. 'I will not kill you, Min.' The Codex glows, and so does a crystal on a chain around the witch's neck. 'I want only this,' you add, reaching forward to snap the chain and take the crystal.

'Tython's Codex!' she breathes, looking hungrily at the holocron you hold. 'What secrets it must hold!'

You fit the fragment into another socket on the Codex, and images flash on its surface. At the same time, another arc of energy jumps from the Codex to the banishment crystal. The figure of Axxva Min shimmers and she is transported inside again. The scattered pieces of the crystal reform themselves with her essence inside. Once again, the Queen of the Nightsisters is trapped within.

On the surface of the holocron, an image of an Imperial admiral on the bridge of a Star Destroyer flickers to life. You don't recognize the officer, but you resolve to find out who he is and how to get to him.

Scenario 4: Hutt Hijack Investigations lead you to the smuggler Ubis Reendorr. To convince him to divulge what he knows, you must hijack a shipment of battle droids from Shalera, the Hutt crime lord.

With little to go on, you travel to many planets trying to discover the identity of the Imperial officer in the holocron image. Desperate for information, you progress from more reputable sources to those of questionable legality.

Finally, your search leads you to a Rodian smuggler on Corellia named Ubis Reendorr. His numerous 'business' contacts make many kinds of information available to him.

'As a matter of fact,' says Reendoor, 'I do have some contacts that will be able to discover that officer's identity.' He reclines in his comfortable office chair. 'Before I contact them, however, you need to do a small favor for me.'

Your eyes narrow and your jaw clenches as you realize you have nowhere else to turn. 'Go on,' you reply.

It's hard to tell with a Rodian, but he seems to be smiling. 'A shipment of battle droids, headed for one of my clients, has been hijacked. I want you to recover it for me. In the meantime, I'll utilize my sources - at no small personal risk to myself - to find out what you want to know.'

Three days later, you find yourself on the other side of Corellia, sneaking into a Hutt warehouse. The shipment of battle droids is there, ready to be loaded onto a shuttle for transport off the planet.

Peering over some large cargo containers, you're surprised to see the infamous crime boss, Shalera the Hutt, personally overseeing the loading of the contraband. A dozen or more of her pirates and thugs are doing the actual manual labor.

A voice rings out clearly over the hum of the repulsor loaders, 'Hey! There's somebody up here!' Blaster bolts start to fire from all corners of the warehouse, and you know there will be only one way to end this.

When the shootout ends, Shalera has escaped. You've defeated her guards, and they've all scattered. You have no trouble commandeering the shipment and bringing it to Reendorr as he instructed.

He seems surprised to see you. You get the idea that he didn't think you could get the job done. 'By the way, Reendorr,' you begin, 'according to the manifests for this shipment, it wasn't hijacked. In fact, there's a good chance that I just stole it from its rightful owners to bring it to you.'

The Rodian pauses for a second, startled. Then he says, 'Let's not quibble about the details, my friend! A job well done for whatever reason.' He waves his hand, like he's making all the problems go away, charming and despicable at the same time. 'I have that information you wanted right here.'

You both take a seat in his office, after he closes the door. 'So I hear you're looking for holocron fragments,' he begins. At your obvious surprise, he adds, 'No, no, it's okay, I won't let this get around. Anyway, your friend here is, in fact, a Grand Admiral. His name is Andal Sait. He's the captain of the Star Destroyer *Blackguard*. Rumor has it he might have one of these items in his personal trophy room.'

The smuggler shows you some holos to back up his claim, and they look authentic. You slump back in the chair in despair. 'How will I get aboard an Imperial capital ship?' you wonder aloud.

'Hey, who's your buddy, man?' asks Reendorr. 'I can smuggle you aboard in a supply shipment, and then you contact Chief Engineer Olum. I've dealt with him before, you can trust him. After that, you're on your own.'

Scenario 5: The Grand Admiral When you return, Ubis tells you that more of the Codex fragments are held by the captain of the Star Destroyer *Blackguard*, Grand Admiral Andal Sait.

You decide to go along with Reendorr's plan. You'll be smuggled inside a cargo container with a shipment of bacta, which has to remain in normal atmosphere. This is reassuring, since most cargo holds are cold vacuum.

It's comfortable enough for the few hours you have to spend inside. Finally, you hear the 'secret knock' you were instructed to wait for, and spring the door to get out.

You meet Chief Engineer Olum, the man that the smuggler told you about. He hands you a datapad. 'Here's a layout of the ship,' he says. 'The item you're looking for must be here, just off the Admiral's office.'

As you stand up, Olum says, 'Straighten your uniform, this ain't the Rebel Alliance!' Then the old man cracks a smile and claps a hand on your shoulder. 'Good luck to you.'

Trying to look busy, you walk through the corridors of the huge Star Destroyer. You nod and keep moving when anyone takes notice of you.

The only problem on the route is a large common area near the port side main airlock. Olum said he didn't know if there would be anyone in there. As you arrive, you find a dozen crewmen working at various tasks. You also see Grand Admiral Sait himself, speaking with another officer and a few stormtroopers.

You think you're going to make it through without incident until you get a good look at the officer. It's Adrick. Your heart jumps into your throat, but you keep walking, hoping he didn't notice.

'Stop right there!' cries Adrick, pointing directly at you. The stormtroopers ready their carbines. You'll have to fight your way out past the Grand Admiral now.

The battle is fast and furious. Your forces get the upper hand and capture Adrick. The remaining Imperials, including Grand Admiral Sait, disperse. It's certain they're heading for reinforcements, so you have to act quickly.

Even in defeat, Adrick is defiant. 'They'll be back in no time. You don't really expect to escape, do you?'

You begin going through the pockets of Adrick's uniform. 'You already have it, don't you? You haven't had time to hide it elsewhere.'

'What are you doing? I don't know what you're talking about!' cries Adrick. Then you find the Admiral's holocron fragment. Adrick quiets down, but shoots you an angry glare.

'You probably played to the Admiral's ego and toured his little trophy room. Then you took this when he wasn't looking. Thanks for saving me the trouble!' You pocket the fragment and grab your weapon. 'Time to get out of here.'

Rushing to the nearby airlock, you find a shuttle docked, and Chief Engineer Olum is there. 'I've adjusted the transponder, and I'll cover your escape from here.' Thanking the Chief once again, you board the shuttle and make a hasty exit, heading for a nearby planet.

Safely away, you insert the Admiral's fragment into the last remaining socket of the holocron. Images flash with a new intensity, and you gape at the wonders within. You're anxious to return it to your Rebel contacts on Dantooine so that the Alliance can begin to analyze the completed Codex of Tython.

Dark Side Campaign: Building the Weapon

Imperial Security agents who have infiltrated the Rebel Alliance report that a holocron of ancient history called the Codex of Tython has been reassembled and taken to Dantooine for safekeeping. It is believed that this relic contains the plans for a shipboard super weapon that could be important to the Empire's fleet - or the captain of the *Blackguard*.

Scenario 1: Capture the Holocron Journeying to Dantooine, you battle a Jedi to capture the Codex of Tython for the Empire.

You arrive on Dantooine and begin to collect information, looking for clues as to the whereabouts of the Codex of Tython. Interrogating the locals provides a tip that a Jedi Zabrak lives in a cave in a remote area.

After a lengthy search, you find what must be this hidden cavern. You have gathered from your intelligence that the woman is dangerous and may be accompanied by Rebel troops.

You are surprised when the woman steps forth from the cave to face you. 'I am Drakka Judarri,' she begins haughtily. 'You have no business here. Leave, before something unfortunate happens.'

You laugh out loud. 'I haven't come this far to be turned away by a simple request. Your Jedi tricks are not that powerful.' You notice behind her several troopers with guns. These must be the Rebels that Imperial agents traced to Dantooine.

'Remember always that you brought this upon yourselves,' says Judarri, igniting her lightsaber. Her defiance is impressive, though it will prove ultimately futile. The Rebels begin to move out of the cavern.

'Your Rebel Alliance will remember this day when the Empire captured the Codex of Tython,' you declare. Motioning your forces forward in an attack, you add, 'Let's get this done.'

As an archaeologist experienced with such ancient recording devices, you are able to examine the holocron and activate it. The surfaces of the object flash with many images of all kinds of worlds and cultures. Your mind is dazzled by the assortment of wonders it portrays.

You are intrigued by the plans for a massive device that moves asteroids. Evidently the Jedi planned to use this tractor beam for mining purposes, placing ore-bearing planetoids in easier reach for advanced civilizations to construct skyscrapers and power plants.

You immediately begin to imagine the military applications of this asteroid mover. Such a device could crush a starship with its power or be used to bombard a planet with asteroids.

Pleased with your most precious acquisition, you wonder who might make best use of such a device. Clearly, the possession of this completed weapon would make its owner a key player in the fate of the Empire and the galaxy itself.

Scenario 2: A Focusing Crystal A two-bit smuggler on Kashyyyk has a rare artifact you need to fashion a focusing crystal for the World Killer.

The reputation of Grand Admiral Andal Sait, captain of the Star Destroyer *Blackguard*, identifies him as someone who would be interested in the Codex of Tython. In a secret location on Dantooine, you contact Sait, explaining the 'asteroid mover.'

The flickering holo of the Admiral laughs sardonically. '*Asteroid mover*? Is that what they call it? *World Killer* is more like it! Ah, those Jedi, so lacking in ambition.'

'Not like you and I,' you reply. 'I assume you're interested?'

'You clearly have something of value. However, I don't know you, so it's hard for me to trust you.' The Admiral thinks for a moment. 'Find a focusing crystal - I'm sure it's detailed in the plans - and bring it to me with the Codex. Then I'll know you're sincere.'

'Yes, Admiral! I'll be in touch soon to arrange a meet.' As the Admiral's holo flickers and dies, you wonder where you're going to find such a crystal. You decide it's worth the effort to please such an influential officer in the Empire's fleet.

After days of visiting spaceports, you hear that a two-bit smuggler on Kashyyyk has acquired a Krayt dragon pearl, which could be the crystal you need.

'Just 'cause you got the drop on me don't mean I got to roll over for you!' In a dark corner of a spaceport on Kashyyyk, you hold your weapon threateningly toward a smuggler named 'Shady' Pers. 'I've got friends in high places!' he adds.

'I bet you attend all the fancy parties,' you begin.

'That's not what I meant.' Pers snaps his fingers, and thugs jump down from every nearby rooftop to stand behind him. 'Now who's got the drop on who?'

The many acquaintances of 'Shady' Pers quickly tired of the battle when it started to go your way. They're nowhere to be seen. Only 'Shady' remains, hands tied and stumbling down a dark alley in the spaceport in front of your brandished weapon.

'You know, we can still make a deal here,' he begins. 'I can get you just about anything you want.' Still thinking, still dealing, Pers keeps trying to talk his way out of trouble.

'All I want is that package from Tatooine you recently received,' you say, poking him further down the street. Pers glances over his shoulder, surprised at your comment, and that shuts him up.

Shortly thereafter, you have left Pers tied and gagged in his warehouse office. In a shipping crate, you carry a white pearl the size of a human head, taken from the gizzard of a Krayt dragon. Worth easily a hundred thousand credits, these rare crystals can be used in lightsabers. They're also described in the specifications for the focusing crystals in the World Killer tractor beam.

Scenario 3: The Jedi Exile A Human Jedi teacher hiding out at Tansarri Point Station has knowledge of the methods to polish and shape the Krayt pearl you have acquired.

According to what you can puzzle out from the blueprints for the World Killer tractor beam, the Krayt pearl that you've obtained needs polishing. Not just any polishing either, but a special technique known to few practitioners.

This sends you on another fact-finding mission. The trail leads to a Jedi hiding out at Tansaari Point Station. Supposedly this human is a teacher to users of the Force, and his name is Nos'lyn.

In a remote corner of the station, on a lower level, you find the one you seek. You hail him as he walks down the street. 'Teacher! I'd like to hire you for a little job.'

Nos'lyn stops and turns warily, regarding you with suspicion. 'I'm not interested,' he says flatly.

'Ever seen one of these?' you say, revealing the Krayt pearl.

'I'm not interested,' he repeats. 'Take your business elsewhere.'

'Look, I don't know anybody else who can polish this crystal, so you're gonna have to do it for me.' You pull out your weapon and put the pearl away.

'You don't want to do this,' says the Jedi, pulling something from beneath his robes. For a moment, you think maybe he's right. But then, like a mist, that thought passes.

'I don't want to kill you, but I'll convince you if I have to,' you declare. As you approach Nos'lyn to attack, his lightsaber suddenly ignites.

'Enough!' cries Nos'lyn, and he turns off his lightsaber and throws it aside. 'I'll do what you want, you don't have to torture me.'

'So you do know how to polish a Krayt dragon pearl?' you ask.

'I have no idea why you would want to make a lightsaber, but yes, I do know the technique.' Even in defeat, Nos'lyn stands straight and composes himself.

'It's not for a hand weapon. It's for something much larger than that.' You show him the Codex of Tython, one side displaying the plans for the 'asteroid mover.'

The human's eyes grow wide. 'You have no idea what you have in your hand there. That is a priceless artifact.'

'That's not your concern, Jedi,' you say. 'Just do the job you're asked to do.'

Over the next few days, you supervise the work that Nos'lyn does in his small workshop. You keep a sharp eye out for any funny business, but the Jedi keeps to his part of the bargain. Soon, you have a finely polished focusing crystal for the World Killer, ready to deliver to the Grand Admiral.

Scenario 4: CorSec Attack An agent of Corellian Security takes the Codex of Tython from you at blaster point. You must fight him to recover it.

Contacting the Grand Admiral once more, you arrange a shuttle trip to meet with him aboard the *Blackguard*. Arriving at the spaceport with the focusing crystal and the Codex of Tython in a secure metal case, you approach the boarding platform for the shuttle.

Suddenly, you feel the muzzle of a blaster pistol in your back. A voice from behind you quietly says, 'Don't move. Not if you want to keep on living. I'll take that case.' A hand removes the case from your grip.

You turn to see a shady character, still holding the pistol trained on your midsection. 'Jasper, Mack Jasper. CorSec.' He nods slightly and grins. 'I understand you have something here that the Rebel Alliance is very interested in.'

'What kind of CorSec agent are you that introduces himself?' you ask, as you watch him carefully for an opening.

'Actually, I'm a very good one-' he begins, and that's when you knock away his pistol and pull your weapon.

'We'll see about that,' you add.

Jasper grabs his pistol with a quick snap roll, and the firefight begins.

Jasper wipes blood from his split lip as he looks up at you in defeat. You bend over to recover the case and say, 'Not good enough this time, Jasper.'

'We're not done here, not by a long shot,' says the CorSec agent, trying to sound defiant.

'We're done for now. See ya later.' You pocket his pistol and leave him sitting on the ground, making your way toward the shuttle platform.

Scenario 5: His Newest Acquisition The World Killer is installed aboard the *Blackguard*. Grand Admiral Sait shows off his newest acquisition - a prototype battle droid.

Meeting with Grand Admiral Andal Sait aboard the Star Destroyer *Blackguard*, you deliver to him the Krayt pearl focusing crystal and the Codex of Tython.

'My faith in you was justified,' beams the Admiral, shaking your hand vigorously. 'With the addition of the final focusing crystal, the World Killer will soon be operational. In fact,' continues the Admiral, 'I would like to include you in the unveiling of my newest acquisition at a ceremony here this evening.' Intrigued, you agree.

You are present with officers and dignitaries aboard the *Blackguard* when the Admiral conducts his pompous ceremony. 'I have been able to acquire many unusual artifacts in my many travels,' he begins. 'One of the finest is my most recent prize, recovered by my devoted troops on Mustapha.'

With a dramatic flourish, a curtain is removed and a huge mechanical creation is revealed. 'I present to you, my friends, the CY-M Prototype Battle Droid.' The droid stands with a large vibro-axe in an imitation of an Imperial soldier at attention.

Unknown to all the guests, a group of undercover CorSec slicers aboard the Star Destroyer altered the programming of the droid. Just as the viewers rise to their feet with polite applause, the eyes of the droid are illuminated.

As the Prototype begins to whine with activation, a murmur of terror passes through the crowd. The droid grasps its vibro-axe with both hands and assumes a combat stance. As stormtroopers stationed at the doorways begin to react, the droid jumps into the crowd and starts swinging its weapon in a merciless arc.

The battle prowess of the mighty battle droid is too much for you to overcome. However, you are able to push it back into a nearby airlock. When CY-M crouches to avoid heavy blaster fire from the remaining stormtroopers, you hit the emergency close button for the airlock.

The droid immediately realizes what's happening. Even as the doors are coming to a close, its massive vibro-axe crashes against the window in the airlock door. Spidery cracks appear. CY-M is banging viciously against the inner airlock door when the outer door snaps open. A rush of atmosphere sweeps the droid into space, where it slowly turns in the void. The battle droid seems to become smaller and smaller as it plummets away from the *Blackguard*.

'Now for the first demonstration of the World Killer,' announces the Grand Admiral in a proud, booming voice. A massive hum comes from somewhere in the Star Destroyer as a bright blue beam stabs toward CY-M Prototype. The droid stops suddenly, and actually struggles against the force of the tractor beam. Then the beam glows more brightly, and the droid is crushed, as if by a mighty hand, into worthless scrap. It moves no more.

House Pack Up

When deserted houses occupy too much space on a planet's surface, new construction becomes impossible. Demolition is the way to make room for future growth. Imperial regional commands have turned this into a training exercise for TIE bomber groups. The houses meant for destruction are marked with electronic beacons, and rookie pilots lock in on them to drop their bombs.

You are present at a bomber command center during one of these operations. The usual training officer was not able to attend this year, and he has been replaced by Sergeant Snopel. While Snopel has distinguished himself as a superior commando trainer and non-commissioned officer, he seems out of his element commanding a TIE bomber group.

The TIEs leave properly on schedule and in formation, vectored toward the houses they are assigned to destroy. As you track their progress with the large holoprojector in the command center, you notice something is wrong. All of the houses are targeted for demolition, not just the empty ones!

'Snopel, you must abort this mission! There are too many houses targeted!' you plead. The sergeant casually swivels his chair to face you. 'Look, I don't know when you arrived here, but I've had two weeks of orientation and I think I know what I'm doing...'

'No, you're wrong! Send the abort code now!' you exclaim, heading for the comm console. Snopel blocks your way saying, 'Calm down now, I'll do no such thing.' He grabs your arm and a scuffle begins. Snopel is a man who is set in his ways, and he's not going to listen to reason. You've got to find a way to subdue him and send that abort code before hundreds of innocent citizens are killed.

SQUADRONS OVER CORELLIA

With direct orders from the Emperor himself, Imperial Special Forces have established a head hunter squadron on the planet of Corellia. Their mission is to seek out and destroy a secret Rebel base on the Corellian moon of Talus. Long rumored to be just a reconnaissance post, the Imperials have learned the base acts as a launching point for Rebel sabotage efforts in the Corellian system and is harboring one of the last known Jedi Knights, Rachi Sitra.

Dark Side Campaign: Imperial Base

At the Imperial academy on Raithal, you are briefed about an upcoming operation in the Corellian system. After traveling to Imperial headquarters on Corellia, you will help plan and execute an attack on the Rebel base recently discovered on the Corellian moon of Talus.

Scenario 1: Academy Attack You are forced into action when Rebel troops attack the Imperial academy at Raithal.

The planet Raithal is the location of the most prestigious Imperial Academy, and you are there under direct orders from Imperial Special Forces and the Emperor himself. You are involved in planning for an Imperial operation with Sith support in the Corellia system.

A long week of briefings is coming to an end. As you enter a conference room for the final summation, alarms ring out. The many cadets in training start to scramble about in terror.

You spy a single Imperial first lieutenant who is trying to restore order. 'Lieutenant, report,' you demand of him.

'We're under attack. A Rebel strike force has landed just outside the Academy. I was trying to organize these cadets...'

You hold up a hand to stop him. 'That's enough. Take me to the location of this attack.'

He leads you through the maze of corridors to the Academy's armory. The whine of blaster fire gets louder as you approach. 'Wait here,' you say to the young officer.

From your vantage point, you see a Zabrak captain leading the Rebel troops. You recognize him from an intelligence briefing as Coret Bhan, an officer who has had many recent successes against difficult odds.

The Rebel force is small, but the commandos are well-trained and efficient. They can't hope to capture or destroy the Academy by themselves. This must be another Rebel hit-and-fade attack to disrupt Imperial planning. Not to

mention the propaganda created from reports of the Rebels striking at the Raithal Academy.

'What... is your plan?' asks the lieutenant. 'We're going to make these Rebel scum pay for their insolence,' you reply with a wry smile. 'Let's organize these cadets and show the Rebels what we're made of!'

With the young lieutenant's help, you are able to rally the cadets and drive away the Rebel troops. The Rebels fall back in good order and rush towards their landing craft. Your trainees let loose a hearty cheer of victory. 'You have all done well, in this most realistic of training exercises,' you say to them.

'The Rebels left some explosives behind,' calls the first lieutenant, holding up a thermal detonator. 'They probably planned to blow up the starport on the way out.'

'That won't be happening now, and it's thanks to you cadets for your courage under fire,' you announce. 'Let's tend to the wounded and get things back to normal here at the Academy. You all have classes to attend this afternoon,' you say with a proud smile.

Scenario 2: Relocation You meet a pirate captain on the way to the Corellian system.

When order is restored at the Raithal Academy, you complete your final briefing for the Corellian operation. Coret Bhan is mentioned as a local Rebel organizer, and expected to be in the system is Rachi Sitra, one of the last-known Jedi knights. You are also given an update on Binayre pirate activity in the sector.

Your work on Raithal is now complete, and you board a Lambda-class shuttle that will take you to the Imperial headquarters on Corellia. On the way, you go over the datatapes with the Imperial officers making the trip with you.

The trip is uneventful until you hyperjump into Corellian space. Your starship is attacked by a KSE Firespray marked with the livery of the Binayre pirates. Her ion cannon targets your hyperdrive, disabling it and preventing your escape. The shuttle is grappled and boarded by the pirates.

As the airlock is forced open, two thugs step through, blaster carbines at the ready. They step aside and a smiling woman enters, carrying a heavy pistol. 'Permission to come aboard? Oh never mind, I'm already here. I'm Kath Scarlet, captain of the Binayre pirates, and I don't like trouble. Surrender and take me to your cargo hold. Or die. Up to you.'

Several other pirates arrive behind her in the airlock, and you realize this is a well-armed and organized band of thugs. One of them is wearing the insignia of Black Sun, and that's a disturbing portent for the Corellian sector.

'I don't think so,' you reply, the cue for you and the Imperial officers to reveal your hidden weapons. 'This is no mercantile starship. We're on a mission for the Empire and you've boarded your last ship, Scarlet.'

After a vicious battle with Scarlet's pirates, you and the Imperial officers finally gain the upper hand. Sensing the situation worsening for her side, the pirate captain deftly escapes back through the airlock to her Firespray. 'See you later, chief,' she says with a wink.

Helpless to follow the escaping pirate ship, you take prisoner several of the Binayre and put them into a makeshift brig aboard the shuttle. Your pilot comes up from below decks and announces, 'The hyperdrive is repaired.' Soon, you are back on course for Corellia.

Scenario 3: Ground Support A squadron of TIE bombers supports your attack on the Rebel base on Talus.

The makeshift drive repairs on the Lambda shuttle hold together and finally you arrive at the Imperial headquarters on Corellia. Handing off your pirate prisoners to interrogators, you join a briefing on the current situation.

A Rebel base has been built in secret on the Corellian moon of Talus. It's the belief of Imperial intelligence that this base is designed to conduct sabotage and spy operations on the Imperial presence in the system.

An attack is being planned on this base, and you're invited to help with the strategy. Onyx Squadron, a group of TIE bombers, will be escorting a flight of landing craft to land near the Rebel base. It's hoped that this sudden strike, carried out in secrecy, will disable the Rebel operations.

The strike force is assembled quickly and leaves later that same night. Traveling silently to the moon of Talus, Onyx Squadron lays down a barrage that allows your transports to land beside the Rebel facility. Imperial troops disembark and immediately engage the Rebel defenders.

A protocol droid stands lookout near a small building with a number of people in simple robes nearby. A Twi'lek Jedi bursts into the open, leading a band of Jedi followers. You hear the splash and hum of several lightsabers igniting.

The ragtag band of Jedi includes wizened hermit types as well as young Padawans. Their leader shouts orders and points with her lightsaber. This Twi'lek woman must be Rachi Sitra, the Jedi knight you were told about in the briefing. She takes command of the situation and wields her weapon with authority.

Since the Imperials have already engaged the Rebels at the base, you signal your group to engage Rachi Sitra. 'Take out the Jedi,' you command, 'But I want the Twi'lek alive.'

Rachi Sitra and her band of Jedi are too much for your forces. Their flashing lightsabers turn away your blaster bolts with ease. As you begin to fall back, you see that the battle with the Rebels goes no better.

The combined troops of the Rebel Alliance and their Jedi supporters have successfully defended their base on Talus, and you are forced to retreat to a nearby Imperial outpost.

When you meet with the officers of the Empire, they are arguing about the intelligence provided for this failed operation. The defenses available to the Rebel base were severely underestimated, and you were lucky to conduct a successful retreat. Now, it's time to start planning the next attack on the Rebel base.

Scenario 4: Garrison Attack A chance to settle the score with a Rebel officer occurs when the Imperial outpost on Talus is attacked.

Licking your wounds, you retreat to the Imperial outpost on Talus, the moon of Corellia. Your recent defeat at the hands of the Rebels still stings in recent

memory. Meeting with the Imperial officers, you begin a hasty debriefing session to assess the damage.

At this meeting, you are introduced to Lieutenant Barn Sinkko, an Imperial pilot trainer from the Naboo system. He was leaving the Imperial headquarters on Corellia and stopped only briefly on Talus. Sinkko's insights and immediate grasp of the situation are impressive.

While your forces were forced to fall back, the retreat was in good order. The damage to the troops and facilities at the Rebel base certainly thinned the ranks of the defenders there. It was the unexpected presence of the Jedi, both their numbers and their tenacity, which doomed your operation.

Before your troops can even get a night's rest, the blaring of alarms throughout the Imperial outpost signals a Rebel counterattack. Sinkko has jumped into the fray and is already organizing the defenses.

In the harsh spotlights from the perimeter of the outpost, you see once again the Rebel captain Coret Bhan leading the attack. Illuminated by flashes of blaster fire, you see that his commandos are supported by heavy troopers and Y-wing bombers.

Rested or not, your troops have no choice but to defend themselves. Grabbing helmets and blaster rifles, all available soldiers rush to defend the outpost. Snopel makes sure that they are deployed correctly. You see this as an opportunity to settle the score with Bhan, the upstart Zabrak Rebel, and advance your own career as a result.

Your defense of the barracks and armory of the Imperial outpost is successful. As your troops begin to make headway against the Rebels, captain Bhan gives the order for the Alliance forces to fall back.

You hear several explosions from the direction of the outpost's starfighter hangars. Evidently their attack was yet another strike-and-fade operation, planned to disrupt Imperial operations on Talus. The Rebels are quickly escaping back to their base, and your troops are in no shape to pursue them.

A junior officer from the comm shack reports that Imperial reinforcements are soon to arrive. The planning for the second assault on the Rebel base will soon begin.

Scenario 5: Important Mission The Imperial attack on the Rebel base commences, but you'll have to defeat a Hero of the Alliance.

The morning dawns with the arrival of troops and TIE fighters to bolster the upcoming second assault. Hard work through the night has repaired the starfighter hangars damaged by the Rebels, and the snubfighters are welcomed into the facility.

According to all intelligence reports, the Rebels have received no reinforcements since the previous attack, so the new forces at the Imperial outpost should be enough to conduct a successful operation. A coordinated assault is planned, including two squadrons of TIEs operating in concert with troops on the surface of the moon itself.

Later that same night, the operation begins. Your TIEs detect a group of transports evacuating from the Rebel base and give chase. Ground troops report that most of the Alliance personnel on Talus have already escaped.

In a battle against the escorting Y-wings, your TIE fighters fired on the Rebel transports, forcing them down in a remote part of Corellia. Your landing craft are redeployed and head for the location of the evacuated Rebels.

Your snubfighters take care of the Alliance air defense and you land near the Rebel transports. You first see a pair of Aqualish commandos, and searching behind them with your electrobinoculars you see Luke Skywalker, hero of the Battle of Yavin, coordinating the defenses.

The troops on Talus report that the Rebel base was sparsely defended and already in Imperial hands. Only the evacuees before you remain as a Rebel presence in the Corellian system. It's time to take care of Skywalker, his Jedi supporters, and his Rebel friends once and for all.

Luke Skywalker and his Jedi put forth a stalwart defense, but your troops realize that this is the all-or-nothing battle for the Corellia system, so they press on and prevail. Unfortunately, the key Alliance leaders including

Skywalker are able to escape in a hastily-repaired Y-wing before you can chase them down.

However, the other Rebels and Jedi that remain alive are rounded up to have their day with Imperial interrogators. With the destruction of the Rebel base on Talus and this victory over the escaping Alliance troops on Corellia, the entire system is now cleansed of Rebels. You're confident that Emperor Palpatine himself will be pleased with your success.

Light Side Campaign: Rebel Base

After recovering the Z-95 starfighter that is a family heirloom on the Corellian moon of Talus, you become involved with the Rebel Alliance forces operating in the Corellian system. Discovering the Empire plans to attack a Rebel base there, you play a key role in its defense.

Scenario 1: Family Heirloom You journey to the Corellian moon of Talus to recover your aunt's starfighter.

'I want to tell you a story,' begins your favorite aunt Evgenia, during a visit with her on Corellia. 'You've never heard this story before, but I think it's time to share it with you now.' You've spent many hours over the years sharing reminiscences with her, but her tone seems more serious than ever.

'You know that I've lived on Corellia for a long time, and I've told you that I used to be a shuttle pilot, traveling all over the system.' You nod, recalling your parents sharing that story. 'There is more to it than that. I used to fly a snubfighter as well. I was a privateer, hunting down pirates and bringing them to justice.'

This revelation makes your jaw drop, and all you can do is stare as she continues. 'I flew a Z-95, the fighter they call the Headhunter.' A smile crosses her face as she remembers the starship. Evgenia places a hand on your arm and leans closer to add, 'It's hidden in a hangar on Talus. I want you to recover it.' Her faith in you is rewarded when you declare you'll use it to fight against the Empire.

Shortly thereafter, you obtain passage on a mining transport and travel to the moon of Corellia. Your datapad's coordinates lead you to the secret hangar. There is your aunt's snubfighter, with the name 'Dire Hound' emblazoned just below the cockpit.

That's not all you find in the secret hangar. You are surprised by a team of Imperial soldiers. 'This fighter belongs to my family,' you offer proudly, facing the blaster carbines they train on you.

'I don't care what your story is, you're not taking this ship,' begins their leader, an officer named Brek. 'It's been impounded by the Empire.' You quickly assess that there's only one way out of this situation.

You'd always heard the troops of the Empire were cowards, and this group is no exception. When the battle goes against his soldiers, Brek deserts them and makes good his escape.

Finally alone with the Dire Hound, you climb up the ladder and seat yourself into the tight-fitting cockpit. A smile crosses your face as you pass your hand across the controls. It's a lot like the smile that crossed your aunt's face when she talked about this snubfighter.

That smile fades when you begin to wonder how the Imperials found this secret hangar. Why were they looking here, and why now?

Scenario 2: Return Trip A pirate captain is after your aunt's starship and you'll have to defend the honor of the Dire Hound again.

Seated in the cockpit of the Dire Hound, a Z-95 snubfighter that is your family's heirloom, you find a preflight checklist and begin to go through it carefully. It's been years since these engines were fired, and you want to proceed with caution.

You are surprised by a proclamation from someone else in the hangar. 'You look good in this Headhunter. Not as good as I'm going to look, of course. Come down here and give up so I don't have to clean up a mess in the cockpit.'

A red-headed woman in a flight suit is aiming a heavy blaster pistol at your head. Behind her are several other thugs with blasters. A few have boarding axes. One of them says to the woman, 'Be careful, boss... this one sent the Imperials running.'

'Pirates,' you say. They're the kind of criminals that your aunt rounded up throughout the Corellian system.

'Observant, too,' she says with a chuckle. 'I'm Kath Scarlet, captain of the Binayre pirates. We followed the Imps here to find the hangar.' She waves her blaster at the Z-95. 'She's got uprated 2b engines, and I like the old bubble canopy. That's why we're taking her with us.'

You've made your way down the ladder to talk to her face to face. 'This fighter belongs to my family,' you begin again, just like you told the Imperial officer. Why is everyone so interested in this snubfighter?

'Aww, that's cute,' says Scarlet, mockingly. Then her face gets a stern look. 'Now, hand it over.'

'I don't deal with pirates,' you reply with a quick-draw of your blaster. The fight is on.

'That's enough boys, it's not worth this,' says Scarlet from the back of the hangar. The firefight was brutal and short, but you've shown them what you're made of. 'We'll meet again, fighter jockey,' she calls to you as she escapes with a couple of her pirates.

You're wounded and too exhausted to give chase, but you've defended the Dire Hound's honor a second time. After a brief rest, you complete the preflight and fire up the engines. They blaze into action the first time, even after all these years. You're able to make your way from the secret hangar on Talus and return to Corellia.

Scenario 3: Join the Alliance Your talk with a Rebel officer is interrupted by a Sith attack on the Corellian spaceport.

At a remote landing pad outside your aunt's home in Corellia, you are happy to see Evgenia reunited with her snubfighter at last. With that same broad smile on her face, she inspects the ship carefully. Then she hugs you and says, 'You brought her home. Thank you.'

'There were a lot of people interested in the Dire Hound,' you begin, as you describe to her the Imperials and pirates who were interested in the old Z-95. 'Why were all these people looking for your old starship?'

After listening quietly to your story, she explains, 'I can't explain it to you now. But there is someone I want you to meet.'

The next day, you're in a tavern at the Corellian spaceport with your aunt and an older man named Lennart. 'It sounds to me like you showed considerable courage on Talus,' he says as you tell him your story. 'The Dire Hound is the stuff of legend here in the Corellian system,' he adds with a nod toward Evgenia. 'We're pleased that this fine starship has been recovered for the Alliance.'

'So it's true, you are a Rebel officer?' you ask of Lennart.

Lennart smiles. 'I am in contact with Rebel leaders in this sector. We'd like to talk to you about helping us fight the Empire.'

An explosion punctuates his words, and several blaster shots are heard from the nearby common area of the spaceport. Lennart says, 'It's the Sith. We heard they might attack today.' He rises to his feet and pulls a blaster from under his jacket.

Moving to the door of the tavern, you see a firefight between Rebels and what must be CorSec operatives battling a group of dark-robed Sith. Lennart is already taking cover and firing his blaster. Realizing that many innocent bystanders are threatened by this attack, you jump into the fray as well.

The battle is chaotic, filled with the swish and hum of lightsabers and the whine of blaster fire against a backdrop of screaming bystanders who are trying to get out of the line of fire.

The leader of the Sith is an imposing warrior, calling for no quarter in this brutal attack. As the pitched battle continues, it's clear that he didn't expect the CorSec agents and Rebels to be positioned in the spaceport at this time. After several of the Sith have fallen, their leader orders a retreat and he escapes with a few of his adepts.

The Alliance fighters begin to tend to the wounded bystanders, and can't give pursuit. 'That Sith's name is Namman Cha,' offers the Rebel commander. 'We've tangled with him several times recently. He misjudged the effectiveness of our intelligence about this attack, but we'll see him again.'

Commander Lennart looks at you and says, 'You fought well. We could use someone like you.'

'I'd be happy to help,' you reply, shaking his hand. Evgenia is watching this encounter and beams happily.

Scenario 4: Infiltration Mission A clandestine mission to infiltrate the Imperial outpost on Talus is interrupted by an old Imperial friend.

At a Rebel planning meeting regarding an upcoming mission, Commander Lennart is giving the briefing. 'From our secret Rebel base on Talus, we have been staging sabotage attacks on key Imperial positions on Corellia.'

'Our newest recruit,' he adds, nodding in your direction, 'has recovered, from its hidden location on Talus, the Dire Hound herself.' A murmur passes through the Rebels at this news. 'Our plan is to sneak that ship through the Empire's defenses and infiltrate the Imperial outpost on Talus.'

'We believe that one ship and one operative can best discover the Empire's plans for the Corellian system.' Lennart looks at you again. 'Are you willing to do this?'

'Yes, I am ready,' you reply.

'Then the legend of the Dire Hound lives again!' declares Lennart, and the other officers cheer.

The next day you are piloting the Z-95 from Corellia to Talus. There are many enhancements to the avionics aboard the Dire Hound, and her jamming equipment allows you to avoid detection and land near the Imperial outpost.

Checking your datapad, you locate an unguarded entry point previously scouted by Rebel agents. Inside the outpost, you locate a data terminal and download the planning documents you came for. Sliding through the darkened hallways, heading back to the Dire Hound, a voice cries, 'Halt!'

You turn to see the Imperial officer Jeffren Brek and a squad of stormtroopers. 'You again?' he says. 'Keep getting in the way like this and you're going to get hurt.' Faced with no other option, you're going to have to fight your way out.

Quickly picking off a couple of the stormtroopers, you put up a surprising defense. Brek jumps behind cover and barks out orders to the rest of his squad.

The Imperials seem disorganized, and you take this opportunity to attack. With a bold charge, you take out two more of the stormtroopers and Brek has no choice but to make a cowardly escape. 'Stop the intruder! I'll get reinforcements!' yells the officer, over his shoulder.

With your weapon trained on the last remaining stormtrooper, he throws his carbine at your feet and raises his empty hands in surrender. You wave your hand toward the exit, and the trooper follows his commander in a craven retreat.

Breathing a heavy sigh of relief, you rush back to the Dire Hound and head for the Rebel base on Talus.

Scenario 5: Special Delivery An evacuation attempt crash lands on Corellia and you must battle the Dark Lord of the Sith.

'The Imperials plan to attack this base,' says Lennart, examining a holodisplay of the data you retrieved. Several Rebel officers are in the briefing room along with Rachi Sitra, one of the last Jedi knights. The Twi'lek woman says, 'We can't defend this facility. Many Padawans are in danger.'

Looking over Lennart's shoulder, you speak up. 'I'll defend the base, Commander. Just give me a squad and...'

Lennart interrupts. 'You have a more important mission. You must evacuate all critical personnel. Get them safely away from Talus.'

Soon, you are in the cockpit of the Spirit of Corellia, a SoroSuub transport. As you engage the sublight engines to leave the landing pad, flashes of blaster fire on the edge of the compound indicated that the Imperial attack has begun.

Breaking away from Talus, you are jumped by a flight of TIEs. Evasive maneuvers aren't good enough, and their cannon damage your flight controls. You must make an emergency landing in a remote part of Corellia.

The landing is rough, but survivable. Your passengers survive with only bruises. Checking your position, you find that you're dangerously close to Imperial headquarters.

Suddenly, you are confronted by a group of Imperials and Sith investigating the crash. You are chilled to discover that they are led by Darth Vader himself.

Rachi Sitra says, 'I'll distract Vader. Take the rest to safety.' She ignites her lightsaber and rushes the Dark Lord. Suddenly, the Sith strikes her down with a Force ability and she falls, unconscious.

You realize that you are the last line of defense to allow the others to escape. You must now face Darth Vader.

The battle with Vader's Imperial and Sith troops has been fierce and brutal. Many bodies are now strewn around the crashed transport starship. Your weapon is unable to penetrate the flashing crimson lightsaber of the Dark Lord.

As he closes to bring his weapon down in a final deadly blow, it is knocked aside at the last moment. Turning away from you, Vader sees behind him the Jedi knight, Rachi Sitra. Recovered from her injuries, she advances with her lightsaber ready.

Assessing the situation, you see that only a few of Vader's troops remain, and some of the Rebels have returned to fight, blasters at the ready. The Dark Lord and the Jedi Knight stand facing each other in a frozen confrontation.

One of the Rebel officers cries out, 'Fire!' and a barrage of blaster fire is aimed at Vader. He deflects all the shots with flashing parries of his lightsaber.

'We must escape! Fall back behind me!' says Rachi Sitra. You retreat from the battle with the other Rebel officers, as they keep up their suppressive fire. The Jedi Knight is the last to withdraw, and Darth Vader does not pursue. You are lucky to escape with your lives.

In the next few hours, you make your way to the spaceport on Corellia. Despite the crash landing and attack of the Dark Lord, most of the Rebels and Jedi have survived. Even though the Rebel base on Talus was destroyed, key personnel have been evacuated and will soon reconnect with the Rebel Alliance to combat the Empire once again.

Punish the Pirates

You are contacted by the Corellian bounty hunter Dengar. You meet with him on the planet Lok, and he begins to make his offer. 'You can imagine that someone as famous as me gets more bounties than he can accept. So I've got a little job for you if you're up to it.'

You nod silently, and he continues. 'Nym is a pirate leader of some repute that holds up in his personal stronghold here on Lok. Somebody wants to get even with him for... I don't even know what for. But the contract is to take him out.'

You inquire about the 'personal stronghold,' and Dengar replies, 'You can't just knock on the door and get in. You'll probably need some skilled operatives to get through the security and make it to Nym himself.'

The bounty for the mission is generous, and you wonder who put this price on Nym's head. But that's not your concern, so you tell Dengar you'll take the job and begin to make plans to get through the pirate leader's defenses.

GALACTIC HUNTERS

Disturbed by Rebel espionage in the Corellian system, the Emperor has lost confidence in the Imperial Army. Determined to squash this Rebel activity, he has contracted the most notorious bounty hunters to capture Rebel officials. When the cunning bounty hunters succeed, the Rebel Alliance is left in disarray. The captured leaders must be located and freed. The Alliance deploys a team of operatives to defeat the bounty hunters and rescue the Rebel leaders!

Dark Side Campaign: Capturing the Prey

Disturbed by the recent successes of Rebel espionage activities within the Corellian system, the Emperor has lost confidence in the integrity of the Imperial Army. Determined to squash this Rebel activity once and for all, the Emperor has contracted the most notorious bounty hunters in the galaxy to capture key Rebel officials, a task his own Imperial forces have been unable to accomplish.

Scenario 1: Hero of Yavin Capture the first of the Emperor's Most Wanted list, a well-placed Alliance officer.

The Emperor's list of Most Wanted officials in the Rebel Alliance includes Wedge Antilles, a well-placed officer in the Alliance High Command. Antilles doesn't often leave the safety of the fleet, so finding a time to attack is difficult. Your Imperial friend arranges a meeting with an information broker who can help.

In a cantina on Tatooine, you approach a dark corner table with a hooded figure. A well-mannered voice asks you to sit down. The mysterious figure claims to have downloaded an itinerary for Antilles.

A metallic hand reaches from the dark and hands you a datapad. As the hood falls away, you see a specialized protocol droid. You realize it's 4-LOM, the bounty hunter.

The datapad has a schedule for Antilles that includes inspecting the Corellian Engineering Company. 'In exchange for this,' continues 4-LOM, 'I collect the bounty on Antilles.' You agree to the droid's terms.

A few days later, you find yourselves in a narrow mountain pass overlooking a CEC starship yard. The landspeeder carrying Antilles approaches right on schedule, and a shot from 4-LOM's concussion rifle cripples it. It lands with a crash, and the passengers quickly disembark.

The two of you emerge from cover, weapons aimed at the Rebels. 'Drop your weapons, Antilles!' you shout. He has several troopers with him, and one has already pulled his blaster. 'I am targeting the armed trooper,' says 4-LOM.

'Bounty hunters,' mutters Antilles. 'We're not going without a fight,' he says, firing from the hip.

You're surprised to find out that the Rebels accompanying Antilles are not green troopers, but a few of his veteran Rogue Squadron pilots. This is not their first firefight. However, your ambush plan provided you with excellent position and surprise was enough to swing the battle in your favor.

Finally, the wounded Rogues throw up their hands in surrender. His pilots can do nothing as you take Antilles into custody. Shortly thereafter, 4-LOM delivers the Rebel officer to Imperial authorities and you can mark another target off your list.

Scenario 2: Smuggler Extraordinaire Pay a visit to a notorious import/export businessman charged with aiding the Rebels.

After helping 4-LOM turn Wedge Antilles over to Imperial authorities, you discuss with him another target on your list. The notorious 'import/export businessman' Talon Karrde is charged with trafficking in information about Imperial troop movements, and selling this to the Alliance.

The droid puts you in touch with the Gand findsman called Zuckuss. He has been observing Karrde and has a plan. It's an inside job, and he welcomes your help.

You will enter Karrde's organization by impersonating an engineer with a stolen datafile. Zuckuss will conceal himself nearby aboard Karrde's starship.

'I have performed a ritual and have foreseen that this stratagem will be successful,' says the uncanny Zuckuss.

You arrange a meeting with Karrde aboard his ship, the modified freighter Wild Karrde. Zuckuss will stowaway in a shipment of starship parts.

With little undercover experience, you are nervous with Karrde. The smuggler looks suspicious as he examines the information on your datapad.

Karrde pushes an alarm button. You can't wait for Zuckuss. 'Alright Karrde, put your hands up!' you yell, as you grab your weapon. 'You're coming with me!'

Behind you, the door slides open and you hear, 'No, he's not.' Karrde laughs when he sees you realize that his guards have arrived. A firefight breaks out, and the vent grid on the wall falls to the floor. Zuckuss leaps out of the shaft and begins firing, and the battle is joined.

In the small confines of Talon Karrde's meeting room, you are able to get the upper hand and deal with his guards effectively. 'Put the blasters down, boys,' says Karrde, raising his hands in surrender. 'I'll give you credit, whoever you are... it was a bold plan, boarding my ship to shoot up my guards. Now, what do you want?'

'We want you, smuggler,' is your answer. Holding your weapon on Karrde, you nod to Zuckuss. He presses a few buttons on a comlink. 'An Imperial shuttle will be docking with the Wild Karrde shortly. You, me, and Zuckuss will be leaving and you're headed for an Imperial prison.'

Scenario 3: CorSec Operative Use some family leverage to apprehend a Corellian Security Force operative.

Your next bounty is Corran Horn, a highly-placed operative in the Corellian Security Force. CorSec is one of the best intelligence organizations in the galaxy. Horn in particular will be difficult to ambush and even more difficult to deceive.

Arriving early for a meeting with an information broker on Corellia, you find a man wearing Ubese armor talking to your contact. You recognize him as the masked bounty hunter, Boushh. You strike up a conversation with Boushh and decide to pool your resources.

Once you work out the terms, namely that Boushh will collect the bounty on Horn, he's willing to proceed. The Ubese agrees that it will be difficult to use a direct approach in apprehending Corran Horn.

'In certain operations, I've found it useful to leverage the relatives of the target,' offers Boushh. 'I've compared the itineraries and defenses of both men, and I believe that Corran's father, Hal Horn, will be easier to apprehend.'

Even though Corran's father is also a CorSec operative, you capture the older man to hold him in a secure location. 'When CorSec finds out I'm missing, you'll have more trouble than you can handle,' says Hal Horn.

'We're after your son, Corran. You're just the bait.'

The elder man smiles. 'That's the worst trouble of all.' It doesn't take long for Corran to discover his father is missing. The flashing lights of Boushh's perimeter alarms awaken you. 'Arm yourself,' whispers the Ubese.

A shock grenade crashes through the window, and stuns you as CorSec operatives break down the door. 'Put down your weapons!' yells Corran Horn as he bursts into the room.

Taking Corran Horn's father hostage made him more determined. He fights like a man possessed. You were expecting a tough fight, and your preparation has paid off. The battle turns into a standoff, but you have the trump card. 'You can't win,' you say to Corran. 'Stop this now. Surrender, Horn, and we'll release your father.'

'Don't do it, son,' says the elder man. 'We knew this might happen someday.'

Corran Horn throws down his blaster, and so his men do the same. He holds his wrists out for you to cuff them. 'Alright, take me instead.' Then he looks you in the eye. 'You're going to pay for this. And pay dearly.'

Scenario 4: Rebel Officer Find an Alliance major so good at his job that he can't get a promotion.

Another Rebel on the list is Coret Bhan, a Zabrak whose career is rising. According to reports, Bhan's field command skills are so valuable that the High Command won't promote him to a desk job. He's been a Major longer than anyone else in the Alliance.

You'll be able to attack Bhan while he's on a mission, but he'll be surrounded by veteran commandos. Your Imperial contacts put you in touch with a bounty hunter who has obtained Bhan's deployment orders from a Rebel courier.

In a warehouse near a mining outpost on Dantooine, you meet with the assassin droid known as IG-88. The dim lighting makes the glowing red optical

sensors of the bounty hunter even more dreadful. When IG-88 speaks, his voice is a deep, cold metallic rasp that chills your bones.

'The target will lead a strike-and-fade operation on Dantooine two days from now,' begins the droid. He hands you a datapad with a schedule and map for the attack.

'The target is an Imperial outpost,' you note. 'If you're to collect this bounty, we'd better take him before he gets there.'

'Affirmative,' answers IG-88. 'Failing to include the interests of the client during the hunt can affect the bounty payment.' He takes the datapad and indicates a spot on the route. 'This is the chokepoint for our ambush,' he says.

In the rough terrain surrounding the Imperial outpost, the Rebels must cover the last kilometers on foot. On a hilltop, you and IG-88 lay in wait. As Bhan leads the commandos into a clearing, trip wires set off flechette mines and smoke bombs placed by the assassin droid. The Rebels are confused, so you launch your attack.

The assassin droid has none of the veneer of civilization that 4-LOM displayed. IG-88 is nothing but a mechanical killing machine. The ambush works to perfection, and soon the Rebels are forced to surrender.

Raising his hands, Coret Bhan says to his men, 'Must be something important in that outpost if they hired these assassins to guard it.'

'We're not defending the outpost,' you say as you take Bhan's blaster rifle. 'We're after you. There's a price on your head, you know.'

IG-88 puts binders on the Rebel officer. 'What the bounty knows is not my concern,' croaks his metallic voice. 'Only the payment matters.'

Scenario 5: Jedi Knight Capture the most important remaining target, a powerful Force-sensitive.

Checking in with Imperial authorities, you update your list of Most Wanted. The most important remaining target is one of the last known Jedi Knights. The Jedi are always formidable opponents, and this is proven when you are put in touch with the most famous bounty hunter in the galaxy, Boba Fett.

Aboard his starship, Slave I, Fett informs you that he has been stalking Rachi Sitra, the Jedi Knight from the Most Wanted list. The bounty hunter never removes his helmet or armor, and his voice is a crackling rasp. 'I've been tracking Sitra's movements for weeks,' he says.

'I have reports of her actions during the battle on Talus,' you say, showing him the briefings you received from Imperial contacts. 'Rachi Sitra is no meditating healer, but an intimidating fighter and a leader of the Jedi.'

'The Jedi are involved with politics,' says Fett. 'That is their weakness.' He flicks on a screen that shows a comm stream. 'This transmission details Sitra's upcoming diplomatic mission to Dathomir.' You could almost swear that he's smiling beneath that helmet.

When Sitra's shuttle jumps into Dathomir space, Slave I is waiting behind an asteroid. Under hard acceleration, the Firespray bursts from cover, and Fett blasts away with heavy blaster cannon. Targeting the hyperdrive of the Jedi starship, the precise shots immobilize it.

Fett docks the two ships and you stand by him when the airlock is forced open. There you see Rachi Sitra, standing to meet you with calm assurance. Without turning to her Jedi bodyguards, she says, 'Get behind me. I'll take care of these bounty hunters.' She spits out the last two words with contempt. Her lightsaber springs to life, Fett fires a rocket from his wrist launcher, and the boarding action begins.

With a precise attack, your weapon knocks away the lightsaber of the Jedi Knight. Bruised and battered, Rachi Sitra staggers back a few steps and stands calmly. 'My guards are defeated, and so am I,' she declares. 'Take me in, bounty hunter, I'm sure I'm worth more credits to you alive.'

As Boba Fett puts a pair of binders on Sitra, he says, 'Yes, you're right, Jedi. And you're worth quite a lot.' To you, he says, 'Let's take her to Imperial authorities.' You have captured the highest bounty on the Emperor's Most Wanted list.

Light Side Campaign: Interrogating the Predators The efforts of the cunning bounty hunters have been successful, leaving the leadership of the Rebel Alliance in disarray. To ensure the survival of the Rebellion, the captured leaders must be located and freed. The Alliance quickly regroups and deploys a

team of less than desirable operatives of their own to defeat the bounty hunters and rescue the Rebel leaders!

Scenario 1: Koono t'chuta? Your search for the Rebel leaders begins with a Rodian bounty hunter.

As the saying goes, to find a mercenary, you have to think like one. If you were a bounty hunter looking for work, where would you go? The likely answer is one of the most notorious dives in the galaxy, Chalmun's Cantina in the city of Mos Eisley on Tatooine.

A wide assortment of smugglers and criminals are in attendance, and after greasing the palms of the bartender Wuher with a few credits, you are introduced to the Rodian bounty hunter known as Thuku.

'I'm sure I have some information that will help you. Why don't we sit down here and talk it over?' says Thuku in his whiny voice, offering you a chair. You begin to describe the Emperor's Most Wanted list and the Alliance supporters that have already been captured. The Rodian listens intently, but offers little when you ask him pointed questions. Like all of his species, Thuku is hard to read, and you can't tell if he's listening intently or falling asleep.

After several rounds of drinks, you are looking about the cantina for some other likely candidate to pump for information. Thuku covers his mouth with his hand and barks out a curious noise that might be a cough. As he looks around the room, you realize it's a signal to his associates at nearby tables.

A dozen thugs throughout the room rise to their feet and arm themselves with blasters, vibroknives, and even a few clubs. The commotion is noted by the other patrons, who abruptly stop talking and stare. After a moment, even the band stops playing. Wuher cries out, 'No blasters!' and runs into the cantina. When the fight begins, the poor bartender is right in the middle of the action.

The room erupts into chaos as the thugs attack you from every corner. Screaming patrons exit the cantina in droves, and soon it's just you and Thuku and his associates. As the firefight continues, you begin to pick off his thugs one by one. Seeing things going badly, his cowardly friends desert him, and Thuku puts up his hands in surrender.

You find that without muscle to back him up, the Rodian bounty hunter is much more cooperative. Thuku knows about the Most Wanted list, but he hasn't yet apprehended any of them. No surprise there. That means he has no knowledge of where the prisoners might be held right now. All he has to offer is a rumor that the bounty hunter known as Dengar reportedly scored a big bounty, and he left Tatooine recently for Naboo.

Scenario 2: Payback Travel to Naboo and find the Corellian bounty hunter known as Dengar.

After confirming Thuku's information with some low-lives at the Mos Eisley spaceport, you travel to Naboo to look for the Corellian bounty hunter nicknamed 'Payback.' From everything you have discovered so far, most of the people that find Dengar end up dead rather quickly.

At Moenia, you receive Alliance reports that include sightings of Dengar near the Imperial outpost at Dee'ja Peak. The Rebels provide you with a landspeeder and a cover story to get you close to the outpost.

You pass by the glorious triple waterfalls, with the natural beauty that draws so many visitors to Naboo. Searching with your electrobinoculars in the fading moonlight, you see Dengar talking with some sneaky-looking individuals on the mountain trail ahead.

Flying up in your landspeeder, you announce, 'Hey, aren't you the famous bounty hunter? We've got a job for you!' Dengar and the others put their hands on their weapons. 'We work for Borvo, he's a first-class employer.'

'Hutt crime lord, eh?' asks Dengar, raising an eyebrow. 'What kind of money are we talking about? I just put away one of the Emperor's Most Wanted.'

'That's just the kind of man we're looking for,' you say, quickly pulling your weapon. 'Now just put up your hands and we'll have a nice little talk.'

With uncanny speed, the Corellian draws his blaster and puts the drop on you before you can do anything. It's a standoff, and Dengar growls, 'Go ahead. Try it. I've got nothing to lose.' His other associates are going for their blasters, and there's no way out of this situation without a firefight.

The Corellian bounty hunter puts up a strong defense, but Dengar's friends are killed and he is eventually overwhelmed and must surrender. He throws down his blaster and puts his hands up. 'Where did you turn in that bounty?' you begin.

'To Imperial authorities at the outpost here,' says Dengar. 'And I was well paid too.' He smiles.

'Where are the captives being held?' you demand.

'I'm just a bounty hunter, what do I know about that?' replies Dengar. 'I have another tip for you, though. The guys I was talking to said they saw Snoova in Dee'ja Peak parading around a bounty in cuffs.'

The Wookiee bounty hunter Snoova has a nasty reputation, almost as bad as Dengar's. 'I'm sure that Snoova will be friendly and helpful,' you comment. 'We'll check that out right after we turn you over to Alliance authorities.'

Scenario 3: Madclaw Enter an Imperial outpost to find the Wookiee bounty hunter known as Snoova.

They call a Wookiee who uses his claws in combat a 'madclaw,' and he is shunned by Kashyyyk society. Snoova carries a death mark for violating Wookiee honor precepts. That's just the beginning of the stories about the famous Wookiee bounty hunter. He's worked for mercenaries and also for the criminal organization known as Black Sun.

If you have to enter Dee'ja Peak to find Snoova, you'll need to continue your cover as smugglers looking for work. The streets are crawling with stormtrooper patrols, so you choose carefully who you ask for information. Along with the many Imperials you find, there are also smugglers, information brokers, and mercenaries. Dodging the Imperials and being careful, it's not hard for you to blend in.

Making your way to the center of the outpost, you are pushed into an alley by a huge Wookiee bounty hunter. 'I heard you're looking for Snoova,' growls the towering mercenary. 'You've found him. I don't like people who ask questions about me,' he adds, flexing his huge claws.

'We're just looking for information,' you begin. 'About the bounty you turned in.'

'You don't know much about bounty hunters, do you?' says Snoova, unslinging his heavy blaster rifle from his shoulder. 'We're not chatty.' Behind the Wookiee, a few Black Sun thugs have shown up. They seem to be Snoova's associates. It's time to give up trying to talk your way out of this situation.

It's a long and vicious firefight. When one of your attacks fells the wounded Wookiee bounty hunter with a massive thud, his Black Sun friends decide it's time to run. Reluctantly, Snoova surrenders. 'I'll tell you what you want to know,' he says with a growl, under his breath.

'Where are the Imperials holding these prisoners?' you ask. 'They must be held at a detention facility somewhere.'

'I turned in my captive to Imperial officers here at Dee'ja Peak,' begins Snoova. 'Wait... I did see another bounty hunter. He said he'd escort the prisoners, but didn't mention the destination.'

'Who was this bounty hunter?' you ask.

'Bossk, the Trandoshan,' replies the Wookiee. 'He must know where they're being held.'

Scenario 4: Devours His Prey Find the Trandoshan bounty hunter Bossk on Tatooine.

Returning to Moenia, you are debriefed by Alliance intelligence. They provide a datafile on your new quarry Bossk, which identifies his personal starship and includes tracking of his recent movements. You are reminded that in Bossk's language, his name means 'devours his prey.'

The Trandoshan is often seen in Bestine on Tatooine, so you head there. Keeping a low profile and your smuggler identity, you search the cantinas to find information about Bossk. At a landing pad at the starport, you see a YV-666 light freighter that must be the Hound's Tooth, Bossk's starship.

Pushing a repulsorlift stacked with cargo, Bossk approaches the landing ramp of his freighter. You introduce yourselves as working for Borvo the Hutt, and

looking for information. The Trandoshan puts down the repulsorlift, but says nothing.

'We understand that you recently turned in a bounty to Imperial authorities, is that correct?' you ask.

'If I tell you, I'll have to kill you,' says Bossk. He puts his hands on his hips, very close to his holstered blasters.

'Borvo sent us to find out.'

'I'll share nothing with lackeys like you,' he replies. Others walk over to stand behind Bossk. They're working for him.

'It's time to send a message to Borvo about how he does business,' begins Bossk. 'I don't like go-betweens.' A chorus of clicks tells you his friends are readying their weapons. Another of your undercover operations ends with a fight.

You've defeated Bossk's thugs and the Trandoshan has no other choice besides surrender. He throws down his blaster and raises his hands. 'Like I said before, all we want is information,' you begin. 'Tell me where the Alliance prisoners are being held.'

Bossk laughs cruelly. 'That's what you want to know? Sure, I'll tell you. You've got no chance of even getting close, much less springing the captives. Besides, I've already been paid, so it's no loss for me.' He describes a rough mountain area just outside of Bestine. It's going to be a tough trek just to get there, and Bossk says it's heavily defended.

'We'll have to make sure you don't alert the Imperial authorities,' you say, pulling out a pair of binders. 'You're going back with us to Mos Eisley to be held for questioning.'

'You've got nothing on me. I'm just a businessman,' growls Bossk.

'Doesn't matter,' you say. 'All I want is for you to be held up for a day or two while we free the prisoners.' Bossk laughs again.

Scenario 5: Mandalorian Battle the best bounty hunter in the galaxy to free the Rebel prisoners.

When you arrive at Mos Eisley, you get in touch with Rebel contacts there, and turn Bossk over for a few hours of questioning. You secure extra ammunition for the prison break attempt and they supply you with body armor and heavy weapons for the assault.

Traveling into the mountain range and following Bossk's directions, you crest a ridge and spy the prison facility in a valley below. It looks to be well defended indeed. Near the main building is a starship landing pad, and you can see a KSE Firespray there.

As you examine the ship with your electrobinoculars, a chill goes down your spine. That ship is Slave I, and that means that the most famous bounty hunter in the galaxy, Boba Fett, is nearby.

You decide to wait for the few moments of dusk on this planet of two suns, and then make your way down the mountain pass. Careful sniping takes out a few guards, and you're able to sneak into the prison compound. You're heading toward what seems to be the main cell block and turn down a corridor to see Boba Fett, blaster at the ready, blocking your way.

'Looking for someone?' asks Fett. Klaxon horns begin to echo throughout the facility, and red flashing lights illuminate the corridor. Imperial troops pour from every doorway. The whine of blaster fire fills the air, and now it's a fight to the finish to rescue the Alliance prisoners.

Your training and discipline enable you to hold the corridor to defend against the tide of Imperial troopers. The body armor and ammo supplied by your Alliance contacts are also key to your victory. The Mandalorian bounty hunter, however, is nowhere to be seen.

As you sweep the adjacent corridors looking for stragglers, you see a cape disappear around the corner. Running to a window nearby, you see Boba Fett's starship already warmed up for launch, and the bounty hunter running aboard. Soon, Slave I lifts into the night sky and blasts away.

The remaining Imperials surrender the prison to your control. The captives held there are released from their cells, and soon you will be returning them to their friends and families in the Rebel Alliance.

Mad Zoo

An officer from CorSec contacts you with a mission. Lieutenant Joth has discovered an illegal laboratory on Corellia. 'We have tracked shipments of smuggled chemicals, tranquilizers, and animal feed to this location.' Joth hands you a datapad that shows surveillance reports that back up his claims.

'The head doctor of this laboratory is named Maldien.' The lieutenant touches a button on the datapad. You see a dossier with a picture of a Mon Calamari. 'Doctor Maldien is using bio-engineering to create monsters at this facility. We don't know why he's doing this or what his plans are for them, but we can't wait to find out. We need you to enter this facility and destroy the creatures.'

Soon, you find yourself breaking into that same laboratory. The downstairs lab is protected by automatic security. You obtain a security code from one of the guards to access one of the researcher's terminals and disable the security system. You also download notes on the experiments from the terminal, which CorSec will find valuable.

Entering the lab, you find the hallway filled with womp rats. Pushing past them, you see the Doctor himself operating a terminal near a huge table with a rancor laying on it. The rancor seems to be subdued or sedated.

Suddenly, the Doctor points and says, 'You! How did you get in here? You have no right to be here!' and then to the room in general, 'Kill them, my pets!' The rancor roars and wakes. Other creatures around the lab move menacingly towards you. You ready your weapon and prepare to finish the mission.

Minstyngar Hunt

On the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk, there is a long and winding path called the Rryatt Trail. Leading from the city of Rwookrrorro all the way to the

Well of the Dead, this trail is home to many of the most ferocious fauna on the planet.

The massive simian creatures called Minstyngar are among the largest and most dangerous of all such beasts. One such Minstyngar in particular is sought after by hunters from all over the galaxy, known only as Scratch.

The famous Wookiee big game hunter Krepauk wants the head of this dangerous creature. Defeating Scratch is not the only challenge to be found in this adventure, since many Minstyngar and other beasts of Kashyyyk must certainly be defeated on the way.

From his comfortable rustic cabin in Rwookrrorro, Krepauk issues his challenge: 'Travel down the Rryatt Trail, bring me the head of Scratch, and I'll make you famous!' You are not the only fortune seeker to answer the call.

The descent down the Rryatt Trail is like traveling through the Nine Corellian Hells. You battle dozens of ferocious beasts including banthas, feral Wookiees, katarns, wallugas, and several different kinds of minstyngar. Good thing you brought an ample supply of provisions and weapons.

Exhausted but determined, you travel off the path in search of your prey. Finally you see Scratch himself... larger than any minstyngar you've seen on the Rryatt Trail. You try to move silently behind him, but then he sniffs the air and snorts. He turns to look right at you, bellows a terrifying roar and attacks.

The great beast is slain! You take its head and return to Krepauk. Many other hunters are there, sharing tales, but they all grow silent as you enter with an oversized bag. Krepauk is genuinely surprised. 'Well, what have we here?' he asks as you approach.

You slam the bag onto a table, and then pull it down to reveal the head. Krepauk grins broadly and says, 'I thought all we'd have is tales of the poor saps that Scratch killed, but now we have his slayer right here!' There is applause and much shouting of encouragement as the celebration begins.

HAPPY LIFE DAY

You often find yourself spending time in a spaceport. It's unusual to find a Wookiee in a long, red robe, accompanied by a protocol droid, talking to various people there. Curiosity gets the better of you, and you can't help but inquire as to what they're looking for.

'My name is Tebeurra, and it's true I am far from my home on Kashyyyk.' The Wookiee speaks in his native Shyriiwook, but the droid quickly translates. 'I ask for your help in recovering some lost items. The smuggler 'Shady' Pers has stolen all the Orga root on Kashyyyk, and we must recover it before the Life Day holiday!'

He goes on to explain that the Wookiee celebration includes a spiritual passage to the Life Tree, and eating Orga root helps them complete this journey. You wave off the rest of the details and tell him, through the translator droid, that you're willing to help.

Just a few days later, you are watching the warehouse where 'Shady' Pers is storing all the shipments. Breaking into a rear entrance, you hope to sneak in and recover all the boxes one at a time.

Before you can grab the first crate, you hear the metallic voice of a Battle Droid. 'Intruder alert! Security breach!' The droid starts firing its blaster and your infiltration plans are ruined.

As you begin to defend yourself, a loud voice rings out through the facility. 'You'll never get past my droid guards!' says 'Shady' Pers over the loudspeaker. 'Surrender now and I'll let you live!'

You're sure from Shady's reputation that isn't a viable option. Your only chance now is to defeat his droid guards to rescue the Orga root for Life Day. Each crate is guarded by one droid, so you'll have to defeat them all to get all the Orga root.

Crazy Wookiees

Your travels bring you to the city of Kachirho on Kashyyyk. On the coast of the Wawaatt Archipelago, the city winds around the trunk of a massive wroshyr tree. At the Kachirho starport, you receive a tip that Sera Jossi is looking for some help.

Jossi barely looks up from her datapad when you enter her office. 'Fanatic Wookiees, that's our problem,' she says. 'We don't know what made them crazy. We do know we need help to keep them under control. Bounties are being offered. Now get out there and get to work!' She starts typing on a data terminal, ignoring you completely now.

You make your way down through the tree city to arrive at the forested plains of Kashyyyk. As you approach the appointed coordinates, you can hear the bellows of the mighty Wookiee warriors. You take a moment to consider the wisdom of trying to subdue a Wookiee, and especially one that has somehow been driven berserk.

However, a job is a job, so you advance with caution. Through your electrobinoculars, you spy a Wookiee with black and white fur who is giving orders. Perhaps he is the cause of the Wookiee insanity.

It doesn't take long for one of the crazy Wookiees to find you, and attack with a ferocious charge. It's going to be a long day.

It's a knock-down, drag-out battle, but at last the mighty Wrhisch falls in defeat. You've scored enough bounties for today, and it's time to return to Kachirho and cash in.

You never found out why the Wookiees were going crazy, but that's not your concern at the moment. You return to Sera Jossi and collect your credits, already thinking about where you might be headed when you leave Kashyyyk.

Destroy All Droids

While traveling through the starport at Corellia, a messenger hands you a datadisk. Activating its holoprojector, you see the image of a helmeted figure. 'Meet me in the cantina right away.' You are mystified by the anonymous request, but you can't resist checking it out.

Soon, you are meeting in a dark corner of the cantina with the person from the hologram. From a faceless, opaque helmet, a metallic voice says, 'I am Bane Malar.' You hear the whine of an atmosphere compressor. 'I have many enemies, and must conceal my identity, so I apologize for the envirosuit.'

You respect the reputation of this bounty hunter, but your patience is wearing thin. 'What is this about, then?'

'I can sense your questions, as I am able to read your mind,' he begins. 'Let us get down to business. The Meatlumps, a local gang here on Corellia, have a problem.' The compressor whines again, and Malar takes a deep breath inside his helmet. 'A droid lava collector has gone rogue, and a group of droids there are out of control. I want you to accompany me there to destroy them. All of them.'

A few days later, one of the Meatlumps opens a concealed hatch leading to a ladder down into the lower levels of their hideout. Malar is muttering to himself. 'Can't read the droids. Won't know what they're planning. Programming failsafes are gone.'

Only a few small indicator lights break the near-total darkness of the lower level. The noise of many small servo motors means that droids are nearby. Malar snaps on a light, and you see dozens of droids, all swiveling their optical receptors in your direction.

Behind them, on what seems like a throne, is an old and battered lava mining droid from Mustafar. Its eyes are flashing wildly as it begins to scream, 'Intruders! Intruders!' and the droids become agitated. Malar wades into the crowd, firing his slug rifle, and the battle begins.

The Explorer's Guide To Clone Wars Relics

Bestine Cantina... one of the last places in the Outer Rim you'd expect to find an explorer claiming to hold the secret to a cache of relics from the war which saw the rise of the Empire.

Of course, he's probably a con artist looking to make a few credits from the local historical museum. That's why I've been sent to meet him -- a junior clerk, no skills that will be missed, my time worth very little and expendable following wild goose chases like this. He claims to be Corellian, which doesn't lend him favor in my eyes: I've never met a Corellian who wasn't a braggart or a thief. And what's he doing on this rock of a planet, thousands of parsecs from his home? Surely he could find a higher price for his 'wares' in the Core Worlds.

I enter the cantina as instructed and eye the room for my subject. It's hard to see in the dim light -- it's high noon, and the full fury of Tatoo's two suns makes it impossible to see indoors after you've been exposed to the outdoor light. Most Bestine citizens are wisely asleep or deep underground where it's cool... though jealous of their fortune, this fact does make my job easier. In fact, the Corellian happens to be the only human in the cantina, slowly sipping an ale in the corner while a cleaning droid makes its rounds.

The man has a silly lop-sided grin on his face, clearly enjoying my discomfort. As I take a seat next to him, the bartender drops a mug in front of me -- Vasarian Brandy, from the smell of it -- and walks to a back room, leaving us in privacy. I size up the Corellian, though I've never had an eye for interpreting much based on appearance. He seems a mixed stereotype: a ragged explorer and soldier, face weathered from long days under a beating sun, outfit simple, a blaster at his side, and something in his eye... perhaps wisdom, or a belief in that religion called the Force? Yet he seems youthful, definitely in the better half of his life, as if his toughness comes not from a long life, but one started earlier than most.

I clear my throat. "So, Mr. Faihon... where do we begin?" I ask.

He chuckles, and slowly lifts something from a bag in the chair next to his. He drops the object in front of me without speaking a word.

It's a DC-15 Carbine, used by the Republic army during the Clone Wars.

I try to hide my shock behind an aura of authority. "You do realize that owning such a weapon is illegal under Imperial law?" I stammer. "You could be sentenced to death for owning this!"

He chuckles again; he seems to enjoy this small show of amusement. He speaks, the first words he's muttered since I arrived. It is a simple request: "Don't you want to know where I found it?"

I want to know, and he wants to tell. It appears there's something to this Corellian. I take a sip of the brandy and settle into my seat, eager to hear his tale, how he ran into this relic of the Clone Wars. It seems the carbine isn't the only treasure he's found...

He begins his tale.

"I once met a Geonosian on a planet filled by slaves and slavers. Seems this fellow was a researcher, there to study the local population -- I know, I've never heard of a Geonosian interested in anything but war, but there you have it. But trouble followed his every step, and it wasn't long before he wound up on the wrong side of local law and was placed in prison.

"I met him because I too was placed in the same prison, but that doesn't matter. Now, don't get me wrong, I ain't a fan of those bugs since that stunt they pulled with the Confederation. But his story had some credibility, and heck, I've got a soft heart, so I helped him out. I had to travel from one side of the galaxy to the other to clear his name, but in the end my reward was a lifetime companion where I never expected one."

"So you helped free him?" *I prompt.*

"When did I say the Geo was the companion?" *he retorts with a chuckle. I concede the point, and wonder what it was he earned from that insect.*

"It was shortly after that I found myself in a party hunting sludge panthers -- if you don't know what those are, don't ask. We found our way to a local cantina, and over a number of drinks I made a friend whose name is unimportant. My friend was, he acknowledged, a Clone, a soldier from the old wars, body slowly dying on him despite medical and mechanical enhancements. I helped him with a 'problem,' and he gave me something I'll forever treasure."

I gasp. "His armor! Or... a piece of it! He gave you a piece of his armor!" I can barely contain my excitement. Such a relic would fetch an emperor's ransom.

"I never said that." *Another chuckle.* "Here, have another drink; we aren't done yet."

"That gun in front of you..." *He motions at the counter, where the gun still rests.* "That gun was a gift from the depths of this planet, given by a man more powerful than you could possibly imagine. Why he chooses to spend his time here, in the court of such a disgusting beast, is beyond me. But I assisted him with a special problem he was having, and he gave me that gun."

"So you were partners with this... man?"

"Not partners; associates. He'd have killed me had I asked to be partners."

I gulp, and look to change the subject; death has always bothered me. "Does... does the gun still function?"

He nods. "Killed a man with it soon as I got it... and that wasn't the only blood it's seen."

So much for changing the subject.

He pauses, thinking his next words over.

"I met a man another man on this blasted planet... self-proclaimed 'greatest hunter of all times,' though what he was hunting in the middle of a cantina I'll never know. I couldn't stand the man's bragging -- that kills me, pronouncing stuff like that -- so I challenged him to prove I was his equal. I equaled him all right, and bested him at that. He knew how to handle a rifle all right, but not in the way I learned... not a soldier's way."

"What did you do?" *I prod.*

"Slew a terrible beast, one that had eluded the great hunter himself. Such a horror it was..." *He stops short. I prompt him to continue.* "It was the first feeling of terror I'd felt since I was a child. I nearly fled in panic at the sight of the creature."

"What... what was it?"

He becomes defensive. "Why? So you can look its name up in an encyclopedia, witness its might through a holographic replay? Would that make you feel courageous? What right have you to know its name? I'm the one who slew it,

and I'll decide who I share my secret with! How many men could stand up to such a creature and have a mere shimmer of hope of defeating it?"

"You sound like that hunter," *I reply softly. He hears me, though, and chuckles again.*

"You're right," *he replies. I sigh, relieved.* "But I still can't tell you its name... it still gives me nightmares. If you want to know, you'll have to find the hunter. Maybe you'll be up to his challenge as well."

Me? Womp rats are enough to give me the chills.

"I decided I needed a vacation after that monster. I hypered to the Naboo system, intent on visiting the Imperial Palace and a few local landmarks... but ran into a few 'friends' along the way. Our chat was short and left me crashed in the southern regions of one of Naboo's moons... Roni? Something like that. Anyways, I wasn't the only person having ship trouble.

"I found a crash site on my way to the nearest starport, no more than a click away, and inside was a map such as I had never seen. Can't tell ya what was on it... belonged to a great pirate king, who conveniently happened to be vacationing in the very city where I ended up. He paid me to track down the other pieces of the map, and conveniently enough gave me some spare parts to fix up my ship."

I slowly shake my head. "Geonosians, clones, a cocky hunter, a man 'more powerful than I can possibly imagine...' and now a pirate king? It sounds a little incredulous, despite what you've shown me." *And it does.*

"Oh, it gets better," *he assures me. This ought to be good.*

"Next you're going to tell me you worked for the Emperor himself," *I tease.*

"Almost, but not quite." *Apparantly I'm not too far off the mark.* "But I did find something of interest to an important Imperial on the planet where I found that Geo. Ever hear of the Sisters of the Night?"

I nod. Who hasn't? The Witches of Dathomir, wild bands of women said to control the elements from atop their rancor mounts, slaughtering any traveller unlucky enough to find his way to that dreadful planet. Terrifying. I shudder.

"The Sisters leave many corpses in their wake... and I just so happened to find one valuable enough to land me a new starfighter. Well, I wouldn't call it new... but it beat the piece of junk I was flying."

"And you got this from an Imperial officer?"

And another chuckle. "Call him an officer to his face, and you'd find yourself dead. But yes, from a member of the Empire... so don't expect to find anything if you're a member of the Rebellion."

"Why would I be that foolish?" *Honestly! Working as a junior clerk at a backwater museum is enough responsibility for me.*

"Watch your mouth," *he replies.* "The story isn't finished yet."

"Remember that vacation I had planned? I finally got back to it, and ran into a member of the Royal Family with a problem."

"Who?" *Naboo has a long tradition of female rules... does he mean the Queen? Or a relative?* "Queen Amidala?"

No chuckle this time. He roars with laughter. "Don't get the news very often out here, do ya? Amidala hasn't ruled Naboo in half a century. No, not Amidala, but this person is every bit as beautiful as Amidala was."

He blushes. Affection, perhaps? Could he have known Amidala? No, he's much too young... "Anyways, this person had a few friends in trouble, and asked me to help out. Royalty kill me -- so much power, but they're helpless to assist a friend in need. I was contacted through channels the Empire would love to know about... let's just say these contacts were more than a little 'rebellious.'

"I solved the Royal problem no sweat... and made out with this beautiful piece of machinery."

He places a hologram projector on the counter. A ship of beauty such as I have never seen is displayed in the air ahead of me. I'm exasperated.

"Is that..."

He grins, obviously proud of the ship. "One of a dozen at most still roaming the galaxy. Beautiful, isn't she?"

I can't find the words to tell him I agree. But he seems to understand anyways.

I can sense the story has drawn to a close.

"So..." *Cough.* "Mr Faihon... do you truly intend to sell these things to our museum?" *My pulse quickens, and I begin to speak rapidly.* "Because if so, the people of Bestine will forever be in your debt. I cannot begin to explain how much this would..."

He cuts me off with a wave of his hand. Such power behind that wave -- as if an unseen force made me stop talking. "No, I am not going to sell my trophies. I am going to give them to you... on one condition."

"Name it!" *This is too good to be true.*

"Follow in my footsteps, with your memory as guide. Find the places I've spoken to you about, and speak with those I came in contact with. Meet their challenges, assist in their troubles, exceed their expectations as I did, and you can have what is mine. That's all I ask."

Of course, something I can't do. "But I'm just a clerk at a museum! I know nothing of hunting or clones or Imperial law or witches or..."

Another wave of the hand. "Quiet. You can and will accomplish this task. Every person has the power to change the universe if he so chooses... and you're being asked far less than that. Take your first steps into a larger world, and you'll find yourself with power and resources you never dreamed of."

Why do I suddenly feel so bold, so fully of energy and hope? I grab a paper from his outstretched hand; it's a starship deed, to a freighter I assume is the one he crashed on Rori. In a daze, I set down my drink, nod at the Corellian, and make my way to the starport. Perhaps he's right... maybe I can do this. But I see things clearly now... dying on a far-away planet, on a mission over my head and beyond my capabilities... surely, such a fate is no worse than working as a junior clerk at an ancient historical museum on the forgotten world of Tatooine.

Call To Arms

.... encoded Imperial Directive received

.... DNA scan confirmed, message commencing

Attention all Imperial Forces in the Naboo System,

The Emperor, in his pursuit of peace and order in the galaxy has once again devised a brilliant device that when complete, will stabilize the galaxy. This new device the "Star Core", although only the size of a small hand-held device, is a power supply capable of running an entire Death Star scale installation. While development is not complete, the Emperor feels confident that we can have this new technology ready soon.

The Empire has become aware of rebel interest in this project. We have been alerted by our informants that they are planning an operation to intercept this technology and use it to spread fear and confusion throughout the galaxy. We must make all efforts to thwart their attempts. At NO COST should this technology fall into the hands of the rebellion. The consequences for the galaxy would be dire.

Please report to our base on Rori at Restuss, the location will be transmitted to you as you approach the planet, once your security codes have been validated. Additional troops will be imported into the system reinforcing our supplies and arms. Additional preparatory information will be sent to your datapad. Since this operation is top secret, we do not want to draw additional attention from our enemies, The Emperor will have elite forces within one hyper jump for quick deploy to Rori if necessary.

We will be waiting for your compliance.

....end transmission.....

... encoded message received, please enter security clearance ...
...code Omega-Alpha-28765 accepted.....

Greetings Friend,

The Rebel Alliance has once again come across some disturbing data about a project that's being lead by the Empire and threatens the stability and freedom of the Galaxy. This is a matter of utmost importance and will require immediate action on the part of all those loyal to the formation of a new republic!

Our operatives in the system of Naboo have found a secret base on the moon of the Planet Naboo, Rori. The Empire is using this facility to develop a new power source called the "Star Core". This new power source would have an unimaginable energy supply that could fuel a whole Death Star and only be the size of a small device that could fit in the palm of your hand. A device like this would be much easier to protect than the previous massive power installations used by the Empire, making our efforts even more difficult. I am sure you can see why this is such a large concern for us.

We will need you to join the fight -- not only stop the Empire from using this device but also claim it for the Alliance. A victory like this may just give us the leverage we need to convince more undecided or frightened systems to join our cause.

There is no doubt that the Empire will be protecting the facilities around Restuss, so please report to the commander at our base located on the planet. This location will be up-linked to your secure datapad. We will need as large of a presence as possible to build up our offenses. We also request that you bring any extra supplies you have to aid in the effort. Additional information needed to prepare yourself for the operation is being sent to your datapad, so please consult it before departing.

Good luck and may the force be with you....

... end transmission

Restuss In Ruins

Out of nowhere, there was a blast that resounded through the trees...

Soon after, he noticed what looked like an invisible barrier pushing across the hillside. All the trees swayed in unison pushed by a wave of energy from whatever caused the explosion. It was slightly warm as it passed by him, sending chills down his spine. He got on his speeder immediately and headed towards home.

As he came out of the forest and over the hills toward Restuss, what he saw before him was unimaginable. The city lay in ruins...the great theater, the city hall, even the star port were all smoldering and on fire. He could not imagine what had happened, but even worse was that he *knew* people here, people that might be injured or even worse...dead.

Pushing his speeder as fast as he could, he swooped down over the hill and approached the city. He could hear weapons fire and many small explosions getting louder and louder as approached. When he got close enough, he could see what looked like an Imperial patrol.

"Halt!" the Stormtrooper said "No one is allowed beyond this point by order of the Emperor; you will have to turn around."

"..But I have friends who may have been injured and... " he was cut off by the trooper.

"All civilians were evacuated. You can find them at the space station. You must leave now, it is for you own... " he was cut off as blaster fire raced by.

Taking their positions behind the fortification, they started firing back. He could not see who the attacker was, but suspected it was whomever was responsible for initiating the battle in the first place.

Still wanting to find out what happened, but not interested in landing in an Imperial prison cell, he went out of visual range of the patrol point then started circling around the ruined city looking for a possible entry point. Fortunately, he was adept at sneaking around. Unlike most others, he learned long ago how to blend in and avoid suspicious eyes. He moved around inside a large Imperial base that had been built only a few short weeks ago. It was bustling with activity but was well guarded. Not wanting to risk anything, he looped around it in a wide arc and kept skirting around the city limits.

As he arrived at the far side of the city, the devastation was even more apparent. From what he could see, not a single building was spared from destruction. The battle seemed to be still raging as well....

but why would there still be combatants after such an earthshattering explosion?

Next, he came to a newer encampment, which was definitely not Imperial. He realized that if he wanted to figure any of this out, he needed to enter the camp. As he did, he noticed two men in old republic uniforms standing guard, and then soon recognized the banner they stood under as that of the Rebel Alliance. He approached and greeted the guards.

"Who are you and what can we do for you?" one of the guards asked.

"My name is Stoer Kilos. I live here and I have friends that may have been injured. If possible, I'd like to help in any way that I can," he answered.

"Well unless you're good with a blaster there isn't much use for civilians here" the guard said.

"I'm not good with a blaster but this will probably do" Stoer said, as he pulled out a small shaft that in less than a moment became a light saber. "I have been living here with friends training for quite some time and I'd be happy to lend my hand to the Alliance ...but first I need to know what has transpired and if my friends are alright."

The guards looked at each other and the one nodded to the other in approval.

"Ok then, go into the center building - that's command. We will tell them you are coming," they said as they picked up the comm.

Stoer moved over to the command building and entered. Inside, there were holos of the city ruins and many blinking red and purple dots. The command center was buzzing with activity and contained several scurrying people dressed in a variety of different uniforms. Some he could recognize, others he could not. Someone looked up from the display and beckoned him over.

"Hi, I've been told you came to help and good thing too-- there are quite a few Imperial troops here and we have to move fast if we are to salvage anything" the officer said.

"But what happened? What's going on? I had friends that lived there and I need to know if they are alive...I have been out in the field for half a day meditating." Stoer said.

"Right then - nothing to worry about as far as your friends go. There was enough time for the Imperial forces to evacuate the city before the explosion, so your friends should be fine. What we need to do now is go in there and find any bits of data, plans or other hardware related to the device that blew up in the Empire's face!" He then motioned to the holo-display. "We have troops at this point, this point and here. We know they were working on the project in this building here," he said pointing at a non-descript pile of rubble, "...but as you can see it's a bit of a mess right now and we have storm troopers coming in by the shipload. It's getting harder and harder to find anything."

Stoer interrupted him for a moment "Anything of what? What were they working on?"

"The Star Core, that's what exploded, it was only in the development stage and good thing, too, or this moon would be about half the size it is currently. Fortunately, the reaction was limited to a radius slightly smaller than the city. It's supposed to be a new type of power supply that can run practically an entire planet.... or even worse, another Death Star! Our job is to gather whatever information we can about it and try to destroy it – or better yet, develop it for use against the Empire." He paused a moment, giving Stoer a chance to interject.

"Well if it did this, there isn't going to be much left of it. Besides, it seems too dangerous to even *try* to recreate."

"Well, you asked what we needed...and this is it, so if you can help, great! If not, you will need to step aside and let us get back to work. If you choose to help, talk to Captain Voldez over there. She will give you an assignment!" The officer then walked across the room to analyze some data at another station.

Stoer stood for a minute deciding what course of action to take...

Shifting Gears

"Lovely planet they sent us to, El-Tee. Positively rustic. I might even go so far as to call it quaint. "

"Quit complaining, Arvee. Vengler's just a little primitive, that's all. "

"Primitive? We landed on a plateau, not in a spaceport. No amenities. Not a cantina in sight. Why not call the place what it really is, sir? A dirtball. "

The Rebel lieutenant scowled at the toad-like quadruped, his second-in-command, then pointed toward the darkening hills. "A little dirt never hurt anyone. 'Sides, we won't be here long. We cut through that gap and surprise the Imperials on the other side. There's not many. A couple dozen stormtroopers, support staff. Should be able to take them without much of a fight. We've got plenty of room on the shuttle for prisoners. "

"Prisoners?"

"Yeah, prisoners. This'll be easy, Arvee. Piece of Mundlop zilg-dicody. "

"Easy, " Arvee repeated. "Too bad I'm allergic to zilg. "

"We free the miners, " the lieutenant continued, "then it's leave time for all of us on a big Ithorlan herd ship. "

The lieutenant had to admit he shared Arvee's view of the backwater world. Vengler was largely uncivilized, particularly this continent, and being on the fringe made it easy pickings for the small Imperial unit that was reported to have moved in and taken over the quendek mine. If it hadn't been for an Alliance spy planted in the complement of a passing merchant frigate, the Imperial presence on Vengler probably would have gone unnoticed for years. Better to bring in a detachment now and shut it down right away, the lieutenant thought-before the Imperials have a chance to build weapon emplacements and set up a base.

"Easy. Phfhffft!" Arvee squatted on his rear legs, scratched at a wart, and reached for the blaster rifle slung over his mottled back. "Right, El-Tee. Easy for

you humans. " He scrunched his lips into the approximation of a pout and eyed the rest of the Rebel force- nearly all of the 150 were Corellian recruits. There were a few Devaronians and a couple of Sullustans in the mix, but he was the only one who walked on all fours. "Easy 'cause all this dust doesn't bother you two-leggers much. At least this beats resting in my bunk and watching the stars go by, " Arvee huffed. "One small outpost. Too bad there aren't two or three. I really like to shoot stormtroopers. I'm good at it, too. " Arvee hunkered down, his brown bumpy hide helping him blend in with the rough landscape. A hint of a smile crossed his bulbous lips. "Hey, El-Tee, can I take point?"

The lieutenant nodded, and the toadlike scout scuttled quickly ahead. The rest of the Rebels trailed behind him. As the stars began to wink into view, they quietly made their way through the gap in the hills.

Arvee sneezed. "I really hate all this dust, " he cursed under his breath, as he ran a webbed digit across the blaster rifle's trigger. "Good thing we won't be here long. " He reached the far end of the gap and glanced across an uneven arid field. "Why, I could take them all out without a bother. Fast. All by my scaly lonesome. Forget prisoners. And then.... " His raspy breath caught in his throat and his legs locked in place as he spotted something at the edge of his vision-several Imperial system patrol craft. There was a building behind the ships. That isn't one outpost. " he whispered in as soft a voice as he could manage. "Or two or three. It's an Imperial base. With lots of weapon emplacements. " The dust swirled around his hind legs as his comrades caught up with him.

* * *

"It's all this dust!" the freighter pilot groaned. "Dust 'n sand. Every time I stay in Mos Eisley for more 'n a few days the stuff gets in my droid's joints. Makes it act up or shut down. Can ya do somethin' about it?"

Amalk Wulqpark eyed the sand-pitted protocol droid the pilot had roughly ushered into his shop. "You shouldn't leave him outside then, " Amalk suggested. "Dust wouldn't be a problem if you kept him on your ship. "

"Can't keep it on my ship. I need it nearby 'n case I come across someone or somethin' I wanna talk to. For business. "

"And you conduct your business on the street?"

"Sometimes. 'N in the cantina, too. But the cantina rules... well, they won't let me take it inside. " the pilot returned. "So I keep it just outside the door. Next best thing. "

Then you must spend an awful lot of time inside the cantina, Amalk thought, for all this dust damage to occur.

Amalk leaned across the counter and ran his age-spotted hands over the droid's tarnished face. It was a kind gesture that was lost on the pilot, but not on the ailing droid. "You're in need of an oil bath, my new friend, " Amalk said softly. "Hammer out a few of these dents. "

"Huh?"

"I said fixing him shouldn't be too much of a problem, " he said more loudly. "It looks like his photoreceptors are damaged. "

The pilot raised an eyebrow and his lips parted in an unspoken question.

"Photoreceptors, " Amalk explained. "Your droid's eyes, the devices that snag the light rays-natural and manufactured-and convert them into electronic signals. The signals are processed by the video computer at the base of his head and are translated into images so he can see. Operates on the same principle as human eyes. In any event, the casings are cracked. Dust got inside and choked the workings. "

"Hate all this dust, " the pilot grumbled.

Amalk's rheumy blue eyes narrowed. "Hmm. Not just the casings. You've got other problems, too, don't you fellow?" He was chatting to the droid, and the droid began to talk back.

"What's that noise?" the pilot cut in. "That squawky stuff? Somethin' wrong with its vocalizer?"

"Vocabulator. Speech synthesizer. "

"Yeah. That's what I meant. Is it broken, too?"

Amalk shook his head. "It's not noise, " he muttered. "It's language. "

"Not one I understand, " the pilot retorted.

"Few do. "

But Amalk was one of those few. What sounded like insects buzzing around the cramped shop's interior was a specialized program language. Droids often used it to communicate among themselves. It was largely unintelligible to organics. Amalk buzzed fluently-questions upon questions tumbling from his lips. The droid quickly provided answers.

"So you travel a lot, I imagine, being a freighter pilot, " Amalk said, finally returning his attention to the pilot.

"Yeah. "

"Get to see much of the galaxy?"

"Yeah. I get around. Even been to the Corporate Sector a few times. "

"Ever travel in Imperial territory?" Amalk asked as he popped the chestplate off the droid and looked inside.

"Yeah. Not that it's any of your business, though. "

"I'd bet that's dangerous. Imperial assault shuttles buzzing around, maybe even a Star Destroyer. But then you look like you're not afraid of much. "

"I'm not. " The pilot puffed out his chest. "Besides, it's not all that dangerous for me. I got some contacts, do some odd jobs for 'em now and again. Just occasional stuff. Stay friendly with 'em and you're better off. Healthier and wealthier. Know what I mean?"

"Indeed I do. " Amalk's thick fingers prodded the droid's wires and circuits. "Hmmm. What have we here?"

The pilot moved closer, tried to peer over Amalk's shoulder to get a look Inside the droid's chest.

"Not good, " Amalk tsked. "Not good at all. See this?"

"What? Dust got inside there, too?"

"No. The locomotor. It's wearing out. It will need to be replaced right away. Your droid probably won't be able to take more than another hundred steps or so under his own power before the locomotor burns out. "

"Good thing I brought It to ya to fix then. " The pilot looked pleased with himself. "Back at the hangar, they said ya was the best. Also said that your lift tube didn't go all the way to the top level... If ya know what I mean. Said ya think more of droids than people. Don't matter to me none about your preferences. Me, I'm just passin' through, an' I need ya to fix it. "

"Him. "

"Huh?"

"Fix him. Fix your droid. "

"Yeah. What's a locomotor? I know shl ps 'n all. Been flyin' a freighter for years. Droids, well, that's somethin' I never took to studyin'. "

"A locomotor is the servomechanism that gives your droid-and other protocol droids, scout droids, and others like them-the ability to walk, to move. "

"So can you replace it?"

"Yes. No problem. But not at the moment. I don't have any spare locomotors in the shop. They're on order. Expected on the next merchant transport. "

"When'll that be. "

"Next week. "

"So whadda I do? I gotta be leavln' in a day, no more 'n two. Got someplace I gotta go, an appointment ta keep. I need it ta translate for me. "

"Him. "

"Yeah. I need him ta translate for me. "

"You could buy another protocol unit. I have a few on sale. " Amalk eased away from the pilot's droid and gestured at his shop's walls.

Amalk's shop consisted of one large room, which when it was built would have been called spacious. Now it seemed small and crowded. The walls were lined with droids. Like soldiers, a few dozen protocol droids stood in a row, their silver, gold, brass, and bronze metal plating gleaming in the light that spilled through the lone window.

Nearby were several R2, R4, and R5 units, and something that looked like a prototype or a modification of another R-series model. Remotes of various sizes hung from the ceiling, blinking and whirring like cantina decorations. Not true droids, they were programmable to perform simple functions and had no independent initiative.

There were also medical droids, mining droids, power droids, companion droids, exploration droids, scout droids, geo-survey droids, and more. One, which looked like a refitted Interrogation droid, was busy dusting the place. Behind the counter were shelves upon shelves filled with metal legs, arms, wheels, treads, spools of wire, circuits, chips, and hundreds of small tools.

"I klnda like that silver one, " the pilot said after looking everything over. "Haven't had a silver one before. Is It on sale?"

Amalk nodded. "Yes, he's on sale. "

"How much?"

"Trade in this droid, which I'll repair when I get the locomotor shipment, and throw In seven hundred credits. The silver droid's yours. "

"Six. "

"Six-fifty. "

"Deal. " The pilot fumbled in his pocket for a credstick. "Got a restraining bolt for it? Notice none of your droids here got 'em attached. "

"Haven't had need for them. " Amalk reached under the counter and fumbled around. "This'll serve. " He passed it to the pilot, and the transaction was concluded.

"Uh, thanks, " the pilot said as he exited the shop. "Wouldn't be able to get my business done properly without one of these droids. " The silver protocol unit cast a last glance at Amalk, uttered a string of rushed sentences in a program language, and followed his new owner.

"Is the pilot gone?" This from an outmoded geo-survey droid.

"The ignoramus, " a partially-repaired chef droid retorted. "I've known smarter remotes. "

"He's crossing the street, " a gold protocol droid said. He was craning his shiny neck as far as it would go and leaning away from the wall for a better view of the departing customer. "There. Out of sight. Headed with C3-LD8 toward the hangar. Poor Eldee. "

The other protocol droids moved away from the wall and started chatting to themselves and Amalk. The R5 units chirped and hooted. And the chef droid ran through the ingredients it needed for Amalk's dinner.

"Good riddance to that customer, " the gold protocol added. "Tatoolne will be better for his departure. At least he's the type Amalk likes to sell to. "

"Thank the Maker I am rid of him!" the sand-pitted protocol droid said. "I had quite my fill of working for that boorish man. Occasional dealings with Imperials, he claims! Hah! He works for them all the time, is leaving now for a rendezvous with an Imperial captain. They use him, though he doesn't realize it. Hire him to make runs into neutral territory or to Alliance-held worlds. He is not very bright for an organic, does not see how they manipulate him so. Does not see how truly evil they are. And might I interject that there is nothing wrong with my locomotor. "

"I know, " Amalk said.

"Then why.... "

"Because I am very bright for an organic, " he returned. "It's a long story, my new friend. You see.... "

"Company!" the scout droid announced. The gold protocol droid leaned back against the wall and his fellows quickly joined him. They pretended to shut themselves off. The R5 units fell silent.

A soft buzz cut through the air as the door opened. Amalk watched a pair of Jawas trundle inside. They were leading a quartet of battle-damaged astromechs, one of which was pulling a one-legged protocol droid.

"Snizniber Ir'tzt" the taller of the two hooded figures began. "R'tmstnirataturatzat. Elrzer tanna dint a minz! Rzdez. "

The sand-pitted droid began translating, a deal was struck, and Amalk passed over a bag filled with hard credit chits. The Jawas left quickly, cutting toward the cantina.

"Looks like blaster fire. On all five of them. " It was the deep voice of the scout droid. He stepped close to Amalk's new acquisitions, and his shoulders moved in the approximation of a shudder. Jawas always made the scout droid more than a little edgy.

"Perhaps. But the scoring looks like a vibroweapon of some sort, " added one of the medical droids. "Note the cut along right wheel-mount. And that is likely what sheered off the leg of the protocol unit. I have witnessed... "

"I agree, " interjected the gold protocol droid. "Why, when I served on a mining ship in orbit about Tibrin there was a Gamorrean who.... "

"No. Definitely blasters, " the scout argued. "Rifles likely. "

"Blaster fire!" the lieutenant yelled. "Rifles! It's a trap! Fall back to the ship!" The high-pitched whines of blaster rifles cut through the air. Dirt showered up where the bolts missed the Rebels and instead hit at their feet. Where the bolts didn't miss, the Rebels fell, clutching their legs and chests. The scent of

burned cloth and flesh was heavy in the air. A dozen men were on the ground, dead or dying in the space of a heartbeat.

"Fall back! Now!" The lieutenant pressed himself against the side of the hill. He cursed himself for cutting through the gap. It was a perfect site for an ambush, he realized. Only thing was, the Imperials weren't supposed to know company was coming. They weren't supposed to be lying in wait. And there weren't supposed to be so damn many of them.

He craned his neck forward, straining to look at the top of the hill across from him, eyes stinging from the dust that was flying everywhere. There! Prone, a few dozen stormtroopers. He saw the moonlight glinting off their white helmets. All armed with blaster rifles, looks like, he thought. Probably pistols for close-in fighting- though he knew his men wouldn't be able to scramble up the hillsides quick enough to get close. Must be an equal number of stormtroopers on the hill above him. A whole lot more than the Alliance intelligence report said would be here.

"Can't fall back!" came a cry from somewhere behind the lieutenant. "Coming in the gap behind us, boxing us in like Roon mogos!"

"How many?" the lieutenant shouted. "Twenty, thirty!" came the hoarse reply. "Hard to tell. The dust's so thick!"

A decision, the lieutenant thought. Have to make a decision now.

"Swarming us from the base up ahead! Coming at us on speeders!" The lieutenant recognized that voice. It was Arvee, his second. "I'd say your informer was wrong, El-T. I'd say we're the zilg-dicody, and the Imps are gonna feast on us!"

"No!" the lieutenant screamed. "We're not going down tonight!" He darted away from the slope and hit the ground, rolling and dodging blaster fire. He paused only to take a couple of shots at the white helmet peering over the hilltop, then he kept rolling, not bothering to see if he had hit the stormtrooper. Have to get a look at the other side of the hill, he thought. Just to be sure. Maybe my guess is wrong, maybe there's not a few dozen stormtroopers up there. Maybe we could charge up that hill, circle round, get back to the shuttle. Maybe.... The keen whine of a tripod-mounted repeating blaster cut through the din. A knifing pain shot up the lieutenant's right leg and

Into his stomach. Then the lieutenant felt nothing, couldn't move. Dying, he thought, probably lasered my leg off. Can't feel, can't hardly swallow. So cold. "Arvee! Your command now! Get the men out of here!"

He didn't hear the toadlike quadruped's reply. The lieutenant was beyond hearing anything.

"Fall back!" Arvee hollered. "Might be fewer in front of us, but it's suicide heading toward the base. " He slung his blaster rifle over his back and scuttled toward the bulk of his men, moving faster without having to hold onto his weapon. He leapt over the body of a Devaronian, registered that at least a third of his fellow Rebels were littering the dusty ground. Should have brought more men, more shuttles. But this was supposed to be a small operation, he thought. Where did all the Imps come from? Must've been monitoring our descent. Waited till we were easy pickings.

Just ahead to his left, three Corellians were squeezed together in a niche under a rocky overhang. They were taking turns poking their heads out and shooting at the white helmets on the opposite ridge.

"Too many of them!" Arvee called as he scampered toward the trio. "Fighting retreat!" He paused when he reached the overhang, slung his blaster rifle off his back again and took aim at a stormtrooper descending the opposite slope. His webbed finger pumped the trigger, sending light-blue bolts of energy kzinging off the dirt and rocks, finally finding a mark on the trooper's torso. The stormtrooper fell. But there were more coming over the ridge now. "Leave me one of your rifles!" he barked. One of the Corellians complied, then the three took off running.

"Fall back!" Arvee shouted at more Rebel soldiers as he wedged himself into the niche vacated by the three Corellians. He hunkered as close to the ground as he could, and his webbed fingers flew over his own blaster rifle, tugging at the stock, opening the compartment where the packs that powered the rifle were held, yanking the packs out. He grabbed his spare packs from his belt and held them all together. Then he fumbled with the rifle strap, used it to bind the packs tight. He grimaced when he saw a half-dozen more of his fellows fall to blaster fire.

"See how you like this, " he cursed softly. He heaved the bundled blaster packs toward the slope the stormtroopers were climbing down, picked up the borrowed rifle, and fired at the bundle.

The explosion rocked the gap. Dirt and gravel showered the stormtroopers and Arvee. Barely over the rumble, the toadlike quadruped heard the screams of dying Imperials. He hoisted the rifle and waited, Intending to shoot at the first glint of white he could spot when the dust settled.

* * *

"Settled in for the evening, sir?" the scout droid flipped up the "closed" sign on Amalk's shop and glanced around to make sure everything was secure. The only light inside was over a worktable where several tools were carefully laid out. Most of the droids had shut themselves down. A few were in the back room taking an oil bath and watching the R2 units gather around the hologameboard.

"No. I'm going to work late tonight. "

"On the Jawas' astromechs?"

Amalk shook his head. "Tomorrow for them. I'm more Interested In the one-legged protocol droid. "

"A sleek design, sir. Nothing I've seen before, and I've seen quite a few come through your shop. Either a very new model or a one-of-a-kind design specially commissioned. Mmmm. I suppose it might also be a very old one, an antique that has been kept in good shape. " The scout cocked his head. "Except for the missing leg, of course. "

"I'll have to use that one. " Amalk pointed to an olive-gray leg hanging behind the counter. "At least until I can fashion one to match the rest of his body. "

"I am certain Y3-FE9 could help. He's becoming increasingly proficient at welding joints. I would help if I could. But mechanics and electronics are not my areas of expertise. "

Amalk didn't reply. He was busy carrying the black protocol droid over to his worktable. With the dust brushed off its casings, the droid looked smooth and glossy, with few sharp angles. Nothing marred its metal surface. He laid it down almost reverently. "I told the Jawas I was only buying you for spare parts. Truly thought so at the time, " he said to himself. "But maybe I can get you running. You'd be quite the showpiece. Wonder what languages you know? How many? Wonder where you've been. Who made you?"

"If you do not need me for anythingsir, I would like to go out back and watch the hologame. "

Amalk wagged his fingers, dismissing the scout droid. "Hmm. Maybe I could sell you to a crime lord who collects fine droids. Or to a merchant who travels Imperial lanes. No matter who I sell you to, you'll make a magnificent Informer. " He flipped open the chestplate and began humming. Picking through his tools, Amalk began repairing the droid.

"Definitely flxable, " he said after a few hours had passed and a thorough memory flush was finished. "Not in such bad shape after all. No. Not at all. Language chip intact. The Jawas didn't know what they had. All you need now is a new leg, a specially-fitted reactivator switch, and my deeply-implanted Intelligence program. Undetectable, unflushable. Perfect. " He continued to hover over the droid.

"No one will ever learn you're working for the Alliance. Your photoreceptors and audial recorders will absorb all manner of Imperial activity, and you'll report back to me whenever you're able to sneak away to download information. Why, maybe I'll even be able to sell you to an Imperial officer. Shine you up just right to catch his attention. You'd gain first-hand information. Yes, you'll make a fine addition to the Rebel spy network. You know, I've placed nearly 50 droids with my program seeded deep inside them. They've been spying on the Empire for more than a year. You'll join them shortly. "

He oiled the black droid's motivator, then carefully polished the metal plates that covered most of the body. "You are a beauty, " he whistled softly. The droid's face was well-defined, not unlike the visage of the chef droid he'd

acquired a few weeks ago. But this one was almost handsome by human terms. The brow swept back to form a ridge that looked like the rounded knuckles of a closed fist. "Judging by that overlarge locomotor, I'd say you will be able to move quickly. Oil you enough and you'll be quiet, too. You have some interesting attachments and compartments. I'll look those over in the morning. "

Amalk pushed himself away from the workbench and retrieved the olive-gray leg. "Hate to put this on you, but I want you up and walking around. Make you a little lopsided, but just for a couple of days. Efeenine will help me craft you a new leg, black and shiny, so well-made that no one but me and you-and Efee, of course-will know it's not your original. There!" He attached the wires from the gray leg to the droid's hip, oiled the joints, then connected the power unit.

The black droid's eyes glowed white against the inky sockets.

* * *

Arvee stared up at the stars, white pinpricks against the black sky. Most of the dust had settled, revealing that his makeshift bomb had taken out quite a few stormtroopers. Their armor-clad bodies were scattered among the downed Rebels, arms and legs at odd angles like broken dolls. So many bodies.

The toadlike quadruped swallowed hard. He'd been in firefights, but not in any with this many casualties. "Back to the shuttle!" he called to the remaining Rebels. "Move your feet or none of us will be making it off this dirtball!"

There were still several dozen stormtroopers to contend with- easily three times as many as there were Rebels still standing. But Arvee trusted that his men were better than the Imps. He cocked his wide head and picked up what sounded like an incessant wail. The speeder bikes had reached the far end of the gap. They'd be here in the space of a few heartbeats. The noise was loud and of varying pitches. Arvee swore under his breath. There were more speeder bikes than he had first guessed.

"Be quick!" he hollered to his men. He squatted amid the bodies between the two hills, hoping his coloration would help hide him. Arvee intended to cover the retreating Rebels, even though he suspected his heroism would cost him his life. He would take a lot of stormtroopers with him, he knew, and prayed enough Rebels would make it back to the shuttle to man the craft and report the Vengler incident.

Behind him the sound of blaster rifles continued. Both sides were firing, he surmised, as the Imps' rifles had a higher tone to them. There was another explosion in the distance. Arvee could tell one of his men had fashioned a makeshift bomb out of blaster packs. Faintly, he heard a victory cry. The voice was Sullustan. He allowed himself a weak smile.

"Maybe the two-leggers can make it out of here after all, " he whispered. Then the speeder bikes were practically on top of him, and he made out the forms of stormtroopers running behind them. "Where did all of these Imps come from?" He swiveled his borrowed rifle and began thumbing the trigger. He aimed for the lead bikes' engines, netting two before the scout troopers realized what was happening. The bikes sparked and sputtered and took their hapless riders careening along what was left of the hillside. "Two down, ten to go, " he grumbled as he dodged a blast from a bike cannon and saw another bike headed straight toward him. "Ah, womp rats. That one spotted me. "

Arvee darted to his right as a speeder bike cannon blasted the spot he'd been occupying only a moment before. He spun about on his rear legs, raised his rifle, and felt himself flying forward. A scout on another bike had passed behind him, ramming the stock of his blaster soundly against the quadruped's skull.

"Gather the prisoners. " Arvee faintly heard the stormtrooper's voice as he was drifting toward unconsciousness. "We've plenty of room for them on the ship. "

Arvee woke in the cargo hold, his legs shackled to the wall. His head hurt and his lungs burned from inhaling all the dust and the blaster fire-tinged air. He squinted through the dim light and focused on his fellow Rebels. He counted 20, all shackled like himself. That meant 130 had died in the ambush. Perhaps, If the

Force was with them, some had escaped.

He shook his head. "Wasn't supposed to happen this way, " he muttered.

"Certainly it was. " The voice was clipped and laced with arrogance, coming from a shadowed doorway.

Arvee peered Into the darkness, his eyes separating the shadows until he found the lanky body of an Imperial captain. The captain smiled and took a few steps closer.

"Your information was wrong, " the captain said smugly. "Your droid spy was fed false reports, made to believe there was only a small outpost near the mine. "

"The base.... " Arvee began.

"Has been on Vengler for quite some time, " the captain finished.

"Why?"

The captain laughed. "Why go to all this trouble to defeat only one handful of Rebel soldiers? Not just one. Dozens. You see, there are other traps being sprung as we speak. "

Arvee sagged against the wall.

"You, and the captured Rebels from our other operations, will be taken to a stronghold on Wayiand, where you will be... " he paused, searching for a word. "Expertly questioned. "

"You'll gain no Information from me or my men, " Arvee spat.

"Oh, but we will. Eventually. And It will help lead to the downfall of your pitiable Alliance. You cannot win. The Empire is too strong, has tendrils everywhere. Now, if I were you, I'd get some rest. This will be the last good night's sleep you'll have. "

* * *

"I need to get some sleep. " Amalk backed away from the black protocol droid and ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "Been working on you all night. " He glanced toward the shop window, where the pink light of dawn was peeking through. "Yes, get a couple of hours of rest, then give you an oil bath. Put you on display. "

He'd made room for the new droid. Amalk's line of protocol droids had an empty space, right in the center. The protocol units were all shut down, conserving their power for the coming day. The astromechs had long-since finished their hologames and had joined the rest of Amalk's inventory in what passed for sleep.

"You can stay up if you like, " Amalk said to his new acquisition. "Make yourself at home. Think of a name for yourself. " He yawned and rubbed his eyes. "See you after a nap. "

The droid's white eyes watched Amalk head to the back room. His black head swiveled silently this way and that, taking in the stock of droids, noting none were active, not even the scout. But to be certain.... The droid glided behind the counter, retrieved the restraining bolts Amalk kept there for customers. There were just enough for the droids it considered a threat. Finished, it moved noiselessly forward, following Amalk's path. It stepped through the doorway, raised its right arm, and a thin blaster beam shot from a palm-plate and struck the back of the tinker as he was pulling up the comforter and climbing into bed.

"Wha.... " Amalk fell to his knees and immediately fumbled in his pocket for his sole weapon, a small hold-out blaster he always kept with him in the event someone tried to rob his shop. He tugged it free and gritted his teeth as he turned to face the intruder. The pain from the wound renewed its intensity when he moved, and he bit down on his lower lip to keep from crying out. Then his mouth dropped open when he saw the black protocol droid take aim at him.

"You?" Amalk fired. The beam from his weapon glanced off the glossy metal and ricocheted harmlessly away. He fired again and again as the droid walked closer.

"No, " the droid said.

It was the first word Amalk had heard the droid speak. It must have connected its vocabulator, he thought, when I was busy cleaning my tools. But why? I wiped its memory. It's a protocol droid. Not a killer.

"No, " it repeated. "I'll not kill you with this blaster. There would be too many questions. " Its angular head swiveled on his neck, its white eyes locked on the vat in which Amalk's droids received oil baths. "Yes. "

Amalk crawled toward the back door, his movements slow from age and pain. The droid followed, stopped him with a strong hand on his shoulder. The tinker struggled, but the droid held him fast, then lowered a hand to his other shoulder, picked him up effortlessly.

"Wh-wh-what are you?" Amalk stammered.

"Not a protocol droid, not something to be put on display and sold as a spy. " The droid's eyes brightened. "I already am a spy. And I serve a master far better than you. "

"The Empire, " Amalk said.

The droid nodded.

"But I wiped your memory. "

"You thought only you could create so complex a program, so deep it could not be detected, not be flushed. "

"Someone discovered me. "

"And someone is undoing everything you have done. "

Amalk sobbed openly. "The Alliance. What have I done?"

The droid carried him to the oil bath, dropped him in the vat and held his head above the inky black surface. "Your nephew will arrive in the spaceport tomorrow and will discover your body. An accident. You drowned while trying

to help an astromech out of the vat. Your nephew Eld will inherit your shop and inventory. Pick up where you left off-selling droids that spy for the military. " The droid pushed Amalk's head below the surface, held the old man there while he feebly struggled. "But he will sell to a different clientele. And it is the Empire that will profit from the intelligence network. "

Amalk's struggles stopped and the droid released the body. It wiped its hands on a towel and returned the shop, finding its place in the line of protocol droids.

It shut itself down.

And it waited.

Lando Calrissian: Idiot's Array

Lando Calrissian surveyed the spires of Cloud City, drinking in the beauty and grandeur of the Bespin mining colony, and pretended that he didn't hear his name being hailed over the com speaker. The floating city's myriad luxury hotels, casinos and upscale housing filled the scarlet, cloud-filled skyline, masking the factories, refineries, repulsorlifts and tractor beam generators dominating the city's lower levels.

Even now, more than a month after winning the city in a high-stakes sabacc match, Lando still couldn't believe he'd pulled it off. After more than a decade seeking fortune and adventure, the entrepreneur and gambler had finally gone respectable. He'd assumed the title of baron administrator, accepted responsibility for the daily operations and more than five million inhabitants of Cloud City -- and he liked it. But it entailed a lot of hard work and stress, and relaxation time was a far rarer commodity than the Tibanna gas his city produced.

A flat, metallic voice from behind him broke through his reverie. "Begging your pardon, Baron Calrissian, but Sir instructed me to remind you of your meeting with Queen Sarna." The voice retained just enough human features to distinguish it from the artificial speech of a droid.

"Lobot, don't call me Baron," Lando replied with a sigh, following the shaven-headed cyborg down a long glass corridor overlooking the city. "And what's the

rush anyway? Sarna made the trip here all the way from Drogheda. She could wait another couple of minutes."

"My apologies, Baron. I tried contacting you several times on your private channel and over the station's intercom system, but I received no answer."

Lando glanced sideways at his chief administrative aide. "I must have missed that."

"Yes, sir. Madame Sarna awaits, sir." Lobot's countenance betrayed no shift in emotion, but in the six weeks they'd worked together, Lando had come to recognize subtle changes in the cyborg's body language, and his posture was even stiffer than usual.

Lando exhaled. "Uh, look, Lobot, I didn't mean to jump on you like that." He placed a hand on his liaison's shoulder. "I guess this whole 'respectable baron administrator' thing has been a bit overwhelming, that's all. I can't gamble while I'm in office. Someone's been trying to kill me, so I can't go anywhere without guards. And every little thing that goes wrong, I have to fix. Sometimes I miss hopping around the galaxy with Vuffi or Tocneppil, or even Dash. Life was easier back when I was playing the rogue. More dangerous, yeah... but more fun. I miss the adventure, Lobot. Sometimes I really miss being a scoundrel."

Lobot approximated a slight smile and nodded. "I understand, sir. The role of baron administrator can be a tiring and thankless task, with little opportunity to enjoy the amenities this complex offers. Perhaps that is why so many of your predecessors took to illegal pursuits to enhance their stay here. That you have not done so is a testament to your character; that you have brought about so many positive changes in Cloud City's management proves you worthy of the title. Know that those of us who financed your final sabacc match against Baron Raynor feel more than compensated for our investment, and that I take no offense at your occasional emotional releases, for you will never be the cruel despot he was."

Lando blinked. "Well, thanks, Lobot. I appreciate that."

"You're welcome, Baron," Lobot replied, his expression unchanged. "This way, please." He extended an arm toward Lando's office.

Lando raised an eyebrow, still unsure how to tell when his associate was joking. He reached for a wall-panel, but before he could release the door, a

low, deep rumbling grabbed his attention. It apparently caught Lobot's as well, for he threw himself at his employer, knocking him hard to the ground and covering Lando with his own form.

The explosion blew the plasteel door clear off its frame and far down the corridor they'd just traversed. Had Lobot not acted so quickly, Lando realized, both would have been cut in half. Oily smoke poured from the room, and licks of flame shot out into the hallway for a moment before foam retardant sprayed from overhead, extinguishing the fire. Lando and Lobot slowly stood and surveyed the damage. Where once was a lavish office and several surrounding rooms, now there was only smoke and debris.

Lando tensed. "Sarna!"

* * *

"Some sort of droid made to resemble a human, sir," Trooper Jerrol Blendin said in astonishment as he held up the charred remains of an arm trailing a mass of fused wiring. "Not very well-designed, though, despite how lifelike it once looked." Blendin handed Lando the burnt appendage. "Stupid thing blew itself apart before you were even in the room."

Lando fixed the guard with a hard glare. "So you think it should have waited 'til I was in the room -- is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir. Whoever sent it obviously meant it to--" Blendin stopped short, his facial muscles tightening as he stammered, "Well, no, sir. I mean, I'm glad it didn't kill you, sir. I just meant that... well..."

Lando grunted. "Relax, Blendin. I'm just frying your sensors." He turned the arm over a few times in his hands. "How is this even possible? No one's made this kind of advance in cybernetics."

"Well, I've never seen anything like it before, though I have heard rumors of some experiments in this sort of thing."

"And this wasn't a cyborg?"

"No, sir," Blendin shrugged. "There was no trace of organic matter in the wreckage."

"A droid that looks like a human..." Lando shook his head skeptically. "Any idea who'd send a replica of Sarna here to kill me, or why?"

Blendin shook his head. "No, sir, we're still looking into that. However, I've contacted Drogheda, and they say the Queen was unaware of the meeting. Maybe whoever did this was trying to sabotage Tibanna shipments to Drogheda."

"I don't think that's it." Lando scanned the room and signaled to Lobot, who excused himself from the wreckage team he'd been assisting and joined the discussion. He handed the arm to the cyborg. "Lobot, that's three attempts on my life in the past week. But this one was different. That explosion could have taken out half this section, killed thousands."

"Do you wish to enact a station-wide alert, Baron?" Lobot inquired.

"I'm considering it, but there's something I want to discuss with you first. And don't call me Baron." He turned to Blendin. "Thank you, Trooper. Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir," Blendin replied crisply, returning to the blast site.

Lando turned to Lobot, indicating the arm. "There's the culprit, Lobot. Cousin of yours?"

Lobot raised an eyebrow dryly, but said nothing.

"All right, my cybernetic friend, I need your help. Where do we stand here?"

"Situational analysis is unfavorable, sir. The assassin has abandoned concern for the safety of bystanders, making this a very real threat to the city. The rooms destroyed in the blast were thankfully unoccupied, but this individual will undoubtedly strike again, and we should not assume we will remain free of casualties when that happens."

Lando massaged his temples to quell his growing headache. "That's what I like about you, Lobot: always thinking positively." He cocked his head silently, and Lobot waited until he spoke again. "I'm the threat to this station, Lobot. Someone wants me out of here, and we're no closer to figuring out who it is than we were with the first attempt. I can't wait around for the fourth try to kill the citizens of Cloud City. As long as I'm here, everyone else is in danger."

Lobot pursed his lips slightly. "That would seem to be the case, sir."

"Well, maybe we can use that to our advantage, then."

"Sir?"

"It was nice knowing you, Lobot, but it's time for me to die."

* * *

News of Lando Calrissian's unexpected demise was broadcast throughout the sector. Memorial services were held on a floating platform high above the surface of Bespin, with coverage from Ugnaught reporter Ars Fivvle and the rest of the *Action Tidings* news team.

"Nice services. Drab color scheme, though." In the cockpit of the *Cobra* in orbit over Bespin, Lando switched off the broadcast and turned to his co-pilot.

"Lobot, I hope I haven't just tricked myself out of a very valuable operation."

"What you have done, sir, is tricked the general population into believing you dead, leaving us free to expose those responsible for the attacks. The risk to your personal assets, I should think, would be secondary."

"A risk to my assets is never secondary, ol' databank," Lando replied. "All right, then, we've set the bait, and we're hiding out safely in the Yucrales Sector. Now we need only wait and see who tries to buy the city. No one would go to that much trouble to remove me from the picture without trying to reap the rewards. My credits are on Drebbles."

"Perhaps, sir. Drebbles was publicly humiliated when I exposed that he'd bribed Raynor's dealer, and he lost favor with your predecessor. However, would that not make me a more appropriate target for his revenge?"

"Well, Drebbles has never been the brightest crystal in the 'saber. I wouldn't put it past him to mess up something straight-forward like revenge if it..." Lando trailed off, and Lobot turned in curiosity.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"Yeah, Lobot. I am. A halfwit like Barpotomous Drebbles isn't cunning enough to pull off three assassination attempts without leaving a clue to his identity. He'd just as soon forget his identicard in the door. He's also not cold enough to

endanger an entire city to kill one man. No, we're dealing with someone far more dangerous."

"There is something else, sir. All along, we've been assuming the attacks were only aimed at you, but what if that's not the case? The Gank who tried to shoot you the first two times did so when I wasn't far behind, and the destruction of your office would have killed me, too. Perhaps we are both targets?"

"Excellent point." Lando stroked his mustache pensively. "And *that* severely limits our suspects. I haven't even been at the station for two months yet, so there couldn't be that many people who'd want both of us dead." He paused for a moment. "I've already ruled out Drebbel, and I can't see the corrupt guards we fired, or the thieves we caught in the casinos and mines, going this far for revenge."

"EV-9D9, perhaps?"

Lando shook his head. "I doubt it. That crazy droid would have done the job herself, and slowly, so she could take pleasure from our pain. That leaves only one person I can think of."

Lobot nodded in agreement. "Raynor."

"Yep. Dominic Raynor himself. Before he left, he threatened me in front of a room full of witnesses, which is why I'd initially dismissed him as a suspect. He'd be too obvious. However, that might be exactly what he was banking on."

"It is plausible," Lobot agreed. "If that's the case, then we will need to--"

A shot off the stern of the *Cobra* rocked the ship and its occupants. Wheeling around, Lando frantically checked the instruments. His personal yacht was fortified with the latest in sensors, making it extremely difficult for another ship to approach unnoticed. That someone had done so did not help his headache in the slightest.

"Where did that shot come from?" Lando yelled in frustration. "I can't find a ship on any of my scopes! What in the Five Fire Rings of Fornax fired at us?"

Lobot paused as data fed into his cranial implants. Confirming the information with that streaming into the ship's nav console, he turned to Lando, uncharacteristically surprised. "Lando, this makes no sense. It appears we are being pursued by--"

"--an Imperial Star Destroyer," Lando finished, his face illuminated by what now occupied the *Cobra's* viewscreen. "But where'd that ship come from?"

The Star Destroyer's pointed bow filled the screen, no stars visible beyond the massive gray wedge dwarfing the infinitely smaller yacht. Two more shots rocked their craft, and a dislodged hose filled the cockpit with steam. Scrambling to re-connect it, Lando punched the exhaust button and flicked a series of switches as the steam dissipated. "The Imps don't have a cloaking device that would let them sneak up on us like that, and there's no trace of a hyperspace jump. What's going on here, Lobot?"

As if in answer, a tractor beam grabbed hold of the smaller ship and began towing it toward a landing bay on the underside of the Star Destroyer. Lando threw a lever to his right, hoping to break free of the tractor. The whine of strained metal filled the cabin, and a popping noise he couldn't identify sounded from astern. He cringed. "I've got a bad feeling about this." He fired repeatedly at the cruiser, which had no effect on the tractors.

Lobot turned to reply, but a broadcast from the cruiser cut him off. "Attention, *Cobra*," a cold female voice intoned. "This is the Imperial Star Destroyer *Faceted*. Disengage engines and surrender immediately. Our tractors overpower your engines. Resist any further and you'll blow your ship apart."

"Lando, she is correct," Lobot warned. "This ship cannot bear the strain much longer."

Lando stared wordlessly for a moment, then reached for a toggle. "Fine, I guess I have no choice but to--"

"Wait, Lando, do not yet disengage." The LCDs along Lobot's cybernetic headpiece flashed wildly as he downloaded a new stream of data. "Something is not right. The power output is inferior to what a ship of that class produces. Moreover, spectral analysis of the laser hits we've sustained does not match that of traditional Imperial armaments. Whatever it might be, that ship is not a Star Destroyer."

Incredulous, Lando faced his aide. "Not a Star Destroyer? Lobot, it's triangular, it's bigger than a pregnant Oswaft and it's pulling us right into its belly as we speak. It sure *looks* like a Star Destroyer to me!"

"Nevertheless, Lando, it is not."

"So you're saying...?"

"It's a hologram."

Lando stared skeptically. "A hologram that can fire and has tractor beams?"

Lobot received more input. "There *is* a ship out there, but it's not much larger than the *Cobra*." He fingered the buttons on his headpiece with all the grace of a Bith musician playing its fanfar. "I shall have its location pinpointed momentarily."

"Attention, *Cobra*," the female voice repeated. "Our sensors show you haven't disengaged your engines. Do so now, or be destroyed."

Lobot looked up. "I've identified the ship-type. It's a YT-1300 freighter."

YT-1300, Lando mused bitterly. *The Falcon*? He recalled his falling out with Han Solo, but cold-blooded murder wasn't Han's style. Deep down, past all his resentment at Han's betrayal, Lando felt there was still a bond between them, and he hoped he never found himself in a position where he'd be forced to betray a friend.

"Its signals are masked to make it appear an Imperial cruiser," Lobot added after a pause, "and its tractors are being bounced to hide their true point of origin."

Lando frowned. "Deep Space Target Practice Units, maybe? I've heard those target drones can be used to transmit a false scanner image. The Oswaft used a similar trick at ThonBoka."

"No, sir. I believe the technology employed is a good deal more complex than that."

"Well, then lucky for me you're here, ol' keypad." Lando's jaw clenched tensely. "Lobot, I need more information if we're going to get out of this. Can you locate the hologram projector and the tractors?"

"Stand by."

"In a moment, there won't be much left of me to stand anywhere!"

"I've got it, sir. Transmitting readout to your console now."

"Time to kick the ronto, Lobot!" Lando punched up the readout, fed the data to ship's weapons and fired at the areas Lobot indicated. Brilliant sparks flared in the vacuum of space before quickly extinguishing, and with them went the entire Star Destroyer. "Yeeaahhh!" Lando yelled jubilantly, clapping his comrade's shoulder.

With the tractors disabled, the *Cobra* shot rapidly away from the freighter that had replaced the larger cruiser. Lando quickly powered down the engines, then swung the ship around to face their attacker, shooting one of its gun turrets clean off. He toggled the intercom. "Alright, you posers, care to continue this fight, or are you afraid of an even battle?"

In response, lasers lanced out of multiple ports on the freighter, pummeling the *Cobra* mercilessly. Console after console exploded around the cabin, the lights flickering sluggishly.

"What the--?" Lando shouted in exasperation. "That ship was firing from places there shouldn't even *be* any weapons!"

"Their weaponry has been heavily modified," Lobot calmly replied.

"Thank you, but I would have appreciated that revelation a little sooner!"

"My apologies, Baron."

Lando leveled an askance glare at his co-pilot.

The voice addressed them once more, accompanied by the image of a human female in her mid-thirties. Blonde hair close-cropped, she wore the hard countenance of one accustomed to physical labor. Her voice was strong but even-toned, her tunic simple and unadorned. "You'll regret that one, Calrissian. That holo-projector drained a lot of credits, and the echo tractor was one-of-a-kind. My contract says I can't kill you and still collect, but the damage to the *Faceted* is going to cost you."

Lando and Lobot glanced at one another. *Contract? Collect?*

"So, you're a bounty hunter," Lando simply said, ignoring her threat. "And here I thought I was dealing with somebody formidable. You're just a hired thug."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't test me, Calrissian. You're not my only job. And don't bother trying to escape -- I've got a tracer buried so deeply on your ship, you'll never find it. I can find you, no matter where you go."

Lando peered at the ship's diagnostics. Weapons offline. Hyperspace engines marginally functional. Fuel and oxygen levels dangerously low. He knew she had the advantage, and what's more, he knew *she* knew it.

Pure sabacc. Of course, that never stopped a seasoned gambler. After all, an Idiot's Array beat even pure sabacc, and a good bluff could beat any hand at all.

Lando smiled at the hunter, pouring on the charm that had won him more than his fair share of female...gratitude. "Apparently, we've gotten off to a wrong start. I don't even know your name."

"Thune," she replied coolly.

"Is that a first name or a last name?"

"Thune."

"A lovely name," he lied. "I'm a wealthy man, you know. I could triple whatever your employer is offering, plus I could provide enticements more...valuable than credits. Surely a lady of your intelligence and loveliness can see that--"

"Stow it, Calrissian. I know you fancy yourself a ladies' man, but I'm immune." On screen, four suited figures space-walked between the ships, carting a large container between them. Thune continued. "I've got a dozen guns trained on you, and I know your ship's condition. Hold position while I send someone to detain you and your cyborg. If you try anything, I'll scrag the contract, and your usefulness to me will end right now."

The screen went dark, and Lando rubbed his chin. Alright, then, it was settled. "Lobot, prepare for a standing jump to hyperspace."

Lobot's eyes widened in a rare show of emotion. "A standing jump? Sir, that course of action is most unrecommended. Our extreme proximity to the *Faceted* could prove disastrous if we engaged lightspeed engines, and we have neither the weapons to fight nor the means to escape her tracking system."

"You're right, my friend -- we don't. What we *do* have, though, is something better. We have Mungo."

"Mungo, sir? I'm afraid I'm not following you. What's Mungo?"

"Mungo's not a what, he's a who. Mungo Baobab, proprietor of the Baobab Merchant Fleet of Manda. I financed his early Roonstone expeditions several years ago. He's owed me ever since. As it happens, we're near enough to the Roon system for a jump to his operation on Quilken. Mungo's a decent guy despite his rather brutish name, and almost as resourceful as I am. Not much of a gambler, but then, no one's perfect. I think it's time for me to call in my marker."

A sharp clang heralded the arrival of Thune's team as they affixed a portable airlock to the *Cobra*'s top hatch. Another minute and they'd be inside.

"With all due respect, sir, how will that help us in our current predicament? Thune'll never allow us to reach Roon."

Lando flashed a toothy grin and gripped his liaison's arm. "Trust me -- I've used this little maneuver before. If we pull up so we're just nose-to-nose with the *Faceted* and then activate hyperspace engines, the flushback as we pass will wash over her ship, not ours. Half her systems will blink out before she even realizes we're gone."

"And if we don't time it right?"

"Well, then we'll never have to read another tedious Mining Guild report."

Lobot pursed his lips, then turned to prepare the engines. A moment later, he looked up again. "Standing by. I hope this works."

"So do I, ol' servomotor. So do I." He cracked his knuckles and keyed in course instructions to the computer before turning ship control over to Lobot. "Okay, let's do this. Pull the *Cobra* up as close to the *Faceted* as you can without touching her. Thune's not going to like that, so we'll have to move very quickly. There will be no room for error. Luckily, one of us has a computer for a brain."

Lobot said nothing as he studied the directions for a moment before easing the throttle forward. The *Cobra* shot ahead as though to ram the other vessel. Agonized screams filtered in over the com as the ship lurched forward, violently casting Thune's hired thugs off into space. Laser blasts stabbed from

the *Faceted*, but Lobot piloted past them and came to a sharp halt barely a half-meter from the other ship's hull, then punched a final key on the navicomputer. The stars became thin shafts of light as the *Cobra* jumped to lightspeed. That he still existed told Lando their gamble had paid off...for now.

* * *

"So there I am, sure as a Hutt that I've won. I throw down my cards and call 'sabacc.' The *Cobra*'s mine again, I'm going home with a nice extra stack of credits in my pocket and I have the added satisfaction of looking *very* good in front of a beautiful lady! That Ymile was quite a looker, let me tell you. Too bad she was Raynor's mistress."

The storyteller paused for a moment to tip back his cup, savoring a long draught of the rich darkoma the barkeep had just set before him. It was his second, and he knew it would not be his last before the evening was through. His two companions exchanged surprised glances.

"That's it? *That's* why he got so mad?" Mungo Baobab scratched his graying black beard slowly. A broad, handsome fellow, he had a glint in his eyes that made him appear younger than his years. "From what I know of Dominic Raynor, he's got enough money that he could accidentally misplace my annual salary and not even realize it -- and I'm doing okay for myself. Why would such small stakes prompt the man to put a bounty on your head?"

"Ah, there's the rub, my friend," Lando replied, one long index finger pointing skyward. "That hand isn't what brought me here today, because I didn't win it. No sooner did I call 'sabacc' that Raynor threw down his own cards with this smug look on his ugly face. An Idiot's Array. I nearly choked."

"Idiot's Array?" Baobab's brows creased.

Lando threw up his hands. "I can't believe it. You still don't know any more about gambling than you did when we met on Socorro! How can you manage a casino if you don't even know what an Idiot's Array is?" Lando's laughter took the sting out of his words.

Mungo smiled, embarrassed. "Well, just because I own the place doesn't mean I'm a patron."

Leaning on Mungo's shoulder, a slight, dark-haired woman with tannish skin, wide eyes and ears slightly longer than average stroked his arm affectionately.

"It's not his fault, Lando," Mungo's wife Auren said. "This resort is mostly for visitors to the Roon system. He's usually too busy arranging Roonstone shipments to Sim'char'ser and other worlds along the Outer Rim. I keep telling him to take time to enjoy all the great things he has here -- not the least of which is *me* -- but you know the Wook when it comes to gem-finding. Sometimes, I'm amazed he even stopped to marry me." She toyfully played with the tail he'd tied in his jet-black hair. He, in turn, bent over and kissed her gently on the lips.

Lando smiled at her use of the nickname he'd given Mungo years ago. When they'd first met, Mungo had worn his beard long and unmanageable despite Lando's repeated advice to get it sculpted. He'd resisted for a long time. Auren Yomm (now Baobab), whom he'd met at the Umboo colony on Roon, had apparently liked the new look, and the two fell in love. Since then, Mungo had taken great pains to look presentable at all times. His resemblance to a Wookiee had greatly diminished, but the nickname still stuck.

Lando drained his mug and leaned on one arm. "An Idiot's Array is a two of any suit, a three of any suit and the Idiot. Beats any hand. Raynor had one, so he won and I was broke. I didn't even have a way home, since he had my blasted ship, but an anonymous benefactor handed me five million credits to continue. I bet all I had, including my starship lot on Nar Shaddaa, against his four million and Cloud City, and he accepted. This time, I won the game, the money *and* the city. He lost power, and he lost face. He was so furious, he left without the *Cobra*, so I, uh, re-appropriated her."

A chime sounded from below table-level. "Speaking of that anonymous benefactor..." He detached the comlink from his belt and held it up to his mouth. "I'm here, Lobot. Go ahead."

"It appears, sir, you were correct in your assumption that Thune would track you here after effecting repairs," the cyborg responded crisply. "She landed a moment ago and is currently examining the ship. Apparently, she remains unaware of my presence beyond the outcropping."

"I guess she wasn't bluffing about that tracer." Lando exhaled loudly. "All right, it begins. If she's any kind of bounty hunter, she'll check my communications logs. Since I conveniently neglected to purge them before heading into town, she'll know exactly where I arranged to meet Mungo. That means she'll be here soon, so we'll be ready. Follow the plan, Lobot."

"Yes, Baron."

Lando sighed and shut off the comlink. "It's like Vuffi Raa never left."

* * *

A little over two hours later, the thick metal door whooshed open to admit a new arrival. Tall and lean, she wore a nondescript grey tunic and dark blue trousers, both cut from a light fabric that perfectly framed her athletic form.

The woman stepped into the crowded room, just far enough for the door to close behind her. She scanned the casino for her prey, and it didn't take long to figure out where he'd gone. Holosigns near the back of the casino advertised the sabacc room--an ornately decorated chamber filled with game tables, mostly unoccupied. The essences of liquor and stale cigarra clung to the room like an incorporeal mynock, and speakers mounted around the casino piped in recorded music.

Thune visually scanned the casino before crossing the distance to the sabacc room. One hand hovered comfortably over the holster worn low at her side.

Lando was seated at a table near the rear, Mungo beside him. Both held sabacc cards in their hands. Few tables were occupied, though a long-haired Zeltron at the bar was making up for the lack of business, his pink complexion even rosier than usual as he added another drained goblet to the long line in front of him.

"You're a good student," Lando told his companion, "and you learn fast, ol' prospector. Unfortunately, it looks like you're gonna need to sign up for some remedial lessons at the Wheel." He smiled widely and slapped his cards down on the table: the Four of Staves, the Six of Coins and the Mistress.

"Sab--" Lando cried out jubilantly. He never finished the word.

Coming toward him at a brisk pace, Thune wore a grim expression, the muzzle of her blaster pointed unwaveringly at his head. "Keep your hands above the table," she ordered. "You too, Baobab. I'm here for Calrissian. I have no quarrel with you, but I won't hesitate to shoot if you intervene."

A woman in an ochre casino-staff uniform reached for a weapon. Thune's head cocked sharply as she sensed the movement. In one fluid motion, she dropped to the ground, shoulder-rolled to her left and swept up the Zeltron in an iron

chokehold as she landed on her feet again. Before Lando was sure what had happened, Thune stood next to him, her blaster kissing his forehead and a knife at the throat of the drunken patron, who gasped for breath but had no success in throwing off her oppressive hold.

The other woman stopped short, caught off-guard by Thune's maneuver. Realizing she'd shown her hand too soon, Mungo's bodyguard tried to fire her blaster, but Thune shot her twice in the chest, leaving two smoking holes in her suit jacket. The smell of burnt flesh told Lando the shots had gone clean through her protective body armor. The woman gurgled, then stared at Mungo apologetically before slumping to the floor, unmoving. A moment later, Thune spun back to shoot a similarly clad guard, this one a man, who moved forward at Lando's left. Three quick bursts and he, too, fell over dead.

he room was eerily silent, save for the recorded disharmonious chords. Lando clenched his teeth at the sight of the dead bodies. Things were *not* going as planned, and he wasn't sure what to do about it. He'd intended to let Thune find him, hoping superior numbers would decrease her odds of success, and with Mungo's security personnel to apprehend her. However, people were dying because of him -- innocent people who'd risked their lives to save his. Leaving Cloud City hadn't stopped the killing. He'd been selfish to come here; he realized that now. He should have let Lobot subdue her back at the ship, away from anyone else, as the cyborg had suggested. Lando hoped their remaining plans would succeed without further deaths.

Thune returned her blaster to Lando's temple. Surveying the table, she chuckled in disgust. "Sabacc, at a time like this. How pathetically predictable. It was far too easy to find you, you know. You disappoint me."

Lando eyed her coldly. "Yeah, well, Mother Calrissian did always say gambling would be the end of me."

"She was right." Thune turned Lando's cards over. "Pure sabacc. Unfortunately for you, an Idiot's Array beats even pure sabacc." The bounty hunter indicated the blackened blaster holes in the dead guards' jackets. "Two in one suit, three in another," she said with a cold smile. "I guess that makes you the Idiot."

Mungo rose to face Thune, his cheek muscles clenched. "I strongly advise you to re-think this, bounty hunter. We process and export precious gems here from the Roon system -- you can't even begin to imagine the security I've got in

place. If you think you can just stroll out of here with Lando after murdering two people, you're quite deluded, lady."

"The bounty on Calrissian was properly contracted, and I carried out the assignment. I have every right to take him," Thune replied. "Besides, I have two hostages, who'll die if anyone tries anything else." Mungo seethed silently. "Calrissian will now lead me to his cyborg. If not," Thune pressed the knife closer to the Zeltron's throat, "I slice Pinky. So back off, Baobab. This is none of your business."

"He's my friend and financial partner. That makes it my business."

"Fine," Thune shrugged. "Have it your way." She spun around to shoot Mungo, moving the blaster-barrel away from Lando's head for only a second. That was all the time he needed.

Faster than a Podracer, Lando flicked one arm up and out, releasing a small jeweled dagger that embedded itself firmly in the center of the bounty hunter's shooting hand. Thune cried out involuntarily as bones and muscles split. Dropping the blaster, she released her hold on the Zeltron to cradle her useless extremity.

As Thune's knife fell away from the Zeltron's throat, the man surprised the bounty hunter by spinning her around with far more grace and speed than someone of his apparent blood-alcohol level should have -- indeed, more than he'd shown a moment earlier. The Zeltron grabbed Thune's injured arm with one startlingly strong hand and thrust it hard behind her back, eliciting a pained grunt. With the other, he squeezed her opposite wrist, forcing her to drop the knife, then scooped both weapons from the floor and tossed the blaster to Lando.

Thune watched Lando with cold gray eyes as he circled the table, patted the Zeltron on the shoulder and halted in front of Thune, pointing the blaster at her mid-section. After a long pause, he spoke. "You know, that Idiot's Array punchline wasn't bad. A little on the melodramatic side, perhaps, and certainly an awful pun on the word 'suit,' but effective from a theatrical standpoint. I'll try to remember that one. Unfortunately for you, though, you forgot the single most important rule of sabacc."

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"A good bluff can beat any hand at all."

Thune offered no reply. A moment later, as the blaster butt came down on her head, she no longer had the opportunity. Mungo signaled two disguised guards to take her into custody. They carried her out to a waiting cell, while others attended to the two fallen bodyguards.

Lando placed both hands on his friend's shoulders. "Thank you, Mungo. You nearly died for me just now. Two of your people did, in fact. I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can...well..." He trailed off, not quite sure how to finish the sentence without sounding trite.

Mungo nodded soberly. "You were there for me. When Koong destroyed the only known Roonstones, when my Merchant Fleet was in danger of going under and all Auren and I had were some failing ships and a pair of secondhand droids, you funded my expedition to find another source. I owe everything I have to you." His voice hardened. "But I promise you one thing: Thune *will* pay for their deaths." Quietly, he followed the guards out of the room.

Lando sadly watched his friend leave, recalling how jovial Mungo had been when they were young. Being respectable had changed them both. He turned to the Zeltron, pulling off the man's wig to reveal a bald cranium with cybernetic implants and a skin tone far lighter than the pink on his face and hands. Lando eyed him thoughtfully. "You know, you look great with make-up and hair," he said. "You might want to consider a cosmetic overhaul when this is all over."

"That would not be my first choice, Lando," replied Lobot.

"When Thune grabbed you and shot the guards, I was sure it was all over. Who knew she'd choose you as a shield? If she hadn't gone for Mungo, I don't think we would have gotten out of that one. Thank you, Lobot," he said, then grinned. "And don't call me Lando."

* * *

Thune opened her eyes, blinking repeatedly as her dilating pupils grew accustomed to the brightness. She was seated at a drab gray table in an uncomfortable chair, and her injured hand had been bandaged. Lando sat across from her, flanked by Mungo Baobab. Lobot stood nearby, his arms behind his back, with three guards situated around the room.

The bounty hunter said nothing, waiting for them to speak first. Lando paused before doing so, hoping to increase her discomfort. "You're an interesting woman, Thune -- named after a pack animal on Dantooine, but a lot more dangerous. I've done some checking up on you through Mungo's sources."

"You found nothing, I'm sure," she replied coolly.

"Not one scrap of data, which intrigued me. The more successful hunters -- Fett, Valance, Cypher -- they're usually the ones with the fearsome reputations and getups. All they have to do is walk into a room and people tell them whatever they want." Lando paused, eyeing the scowling woman before him. "But not you. No one's heard of you, you hardly carry any weapons and you dress like you're going out for lunch at the Biscuit Baron. It's pretty unusual for a bounty hunter. And yet, the way you took apart the *Cobra* without killing me or Lobot, the way you saw through our little drama at the casino... that tells me you're just as good as the high-profile guys. Maybe even better. Plus, you managed to stick a tracer on my ship without Lobot or Mungo's best techs finding it. That concerns me, because eventually you're just going to come back and try again."

"You talk too much, Calrissian," Thune sneered. "It gives me a headache."

Mungo leaned forward, staring her directly in the eyes. "You've got a lot more than a headache coming, Thune. You might have had a deal for Lando and Lobot, but my people weren't part of it. You killed them without a contract, and that makes you a murderer."

"Entitling you to an all-expenses-paid vacation to the nearest Imperial detention center," Lando added.

Thune laughed, unimpressed. "You're one to talk, Calrissian -- or did you forget about the four employees of *mine* you tossed off into space? I suppose *that* wasn't murder, right? No, they weren't people -- they were just hired thugs. What a hypocrite you are."

Lando said nothing.

"Go ahead -- have me imprisoned," she continued. "But you'd be better off killing me. I'd just be out the next day anyway." Thune leaned forward, staring her captors down. "You found no record of my background because I *made* it that way. I've got allies among the Imperials. I do them special favors, and they set up contracts for me. Men like Dominic Raynor have more than money:

They have power, and that means they have friends who'll make sure I'm back on your trail before you even have time to wax that ridiculous mustache."

"That's why you're sitting here instead of in an Imperial holding cell," Lando replied. "If your friends don't know you're in trouble, they can't bail you out."

Thune eyed both men. "All right, so you're not turning me over to the Empire, and you're not going to kill me -- or I'd be dead by now. Obviously, you're not just going to let me go, so let's skip all this macho posturing and get down to business."

"Actually," Lando admitted, "that's exactly what we're going to do. See, there's still the little issue of Dominic Raynor. Even if we did find a way to remove you from the picture, he'd just send someone else to take your place."

"So what's to stop me from coming back to finish the job?" Thune spat out.

"This," said Lando, nodding to his left.

Lobot placed a small metallic object against Thune's neck. The hunter resisted, but his grip immobilized her. The device made a small hiss, and she rubbed her neck, glaring. "What's going on here? What did that 'borg just do to me?"

Mungo leaned down on one knee, meeting Thune's stare at eye level. "Let me tell you about Roonstones," he began. "There's a particular stone called kessum--one of the more common rocks in the system, though its value as a gem is poor. It breaks apart too easily. We first thought it was about as useful as beach sand, until a member of my staff stuck a few kessums in his pocket to study, then forgot about them. As he left the lab, theft sensors picked up the stones and alerted Security, but the scanner kept pinpointing different locations outside his body, as if the stones were shifting position. He pulled out the rocks, but the scanner couldn't recognize them--even when he held them up in front of it. We later confirmed that kessum somehow randomly bounces electronic signals off surrounding objects. The potential for advances in tracer technology was staggering."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Thune demanded, shifting in her bonds.

"Because," Lando explained with his most ingratiating smile, "you've just had a sample of kessum injected into your bloodstream."

Thune tried to rise, but two guards forcefully pushed her back into her seat.

"Don't worry, it's completely harmless. You could eat a chunk of kessum every day for a year, and aside from a bad case of Tatooine-mouth, you'd be fine. But it's in there for life, buried so deep in your bloodstream no one will ever find it." Lando grinned darkly, savoring the moment. "That's for the tracer you put on the *Cobra*."

Thune sneered. "You just made a big mistake, Calrissian. You too, Baobab. If you think I'm going to let you inject a foreign substance into my body--"

"We'd be spot-on," Lando finished for her. "You seem to be forgetting the nature of kessum. Its exact location can't be pinpointed, but," he paused, "it *can* be traced to within a three-meter radius. If you come within a light-year of us, or either of our operations, I'll know, and certain associates of ours will track you down. They used to work for Bwahl the Hutt as interrogators. The results would be... messy."

Thune stared angrily, knowing he'd won. "Do I get to keep the *Faceted*?"

"You get your ship, your freedom and your life. I'd say the terms of the deal were fair, wouldn't you?"

"Only if you call keeping what I already had fair." But she didn't press the issue.

"There's a second part of this deal," Lando added, almost as an after-thought. "This one directly pertains to my situation with Raynor. Eliminating you from the picture only means he'll have to send someone else. Next time, it could be Boba Fett, and he has a personal grudge where I'm concerned that goes back years."

Mungo stepped in. "How much was Raynor paying you for Lando and Lobot?"

"200,000 credits."

"We'll pay you a tenth of that sum in Roonstones for Raynor's capture."

Thune scoffed. "You can't be serious. That wouldn't even cover my expenses."

"Fine. We'll get someone else. But consider this..." Lando pointed an index finger at the bounty hunter. "If we did, your usefulness to us would end right now. And Bwahl owes me."

"So what's to keep you from killing me after I get him for you?"

"Nothing -- except our gratitude for helping us deal with Raynor," Lando replied with a shrug. "You'd just have to trust us."

"I don't." She looked down at the table, her face impassive. "But I'll do it. At least this trip won't be a total loss."

* * *

The *Action Tidings* team worked overtime as the news began pouring in: Baron Administrator Lando Calrissian, thought killed in an explosion a few days before, alive and resuming control of Cloud City... his predecessor, Dominic Raynor, reported missing...a firefight at the Club Baobab on Quilken, said to involve Calrissian and his cyborg liaison.

Surveying the city from a familiar perch, Lando welcomed the strong winds rustling his hair and cape. Lobot stood nearby, hands folded across his chest, his face impassive.

"It feels strange to be back," Lando sighed. "It's like nothing changed."

"Were you really expecting it to, sir?"

"Maybe. No, not really. It's just that when all the fanfare about our return died down, it didn't take long for the usual problems to come back to haunt me: shipping foul-ups, Guild inquiries, threats of another Ugnaught strike." Lando inhaled deeply. "At least the Raynor situation's been dealt with. By the time Bwahl's associates finish 'persuading' him to drop his vendetta, it's a safe bet we won't need to worry about him anymore. Looks like I'm back to being respectable." He paused for a moment to watch a flock of jocoscorros float by on gossamer wings.

"But I'll tell you one thing, Lobot," Lando added, leaning against a railing as he turned to his friend and grinned. "It sure felt good to be a scoundrel again."

Sore Loser's Revenge

In addition to his smooth charm and unbelievable luck, Lando Calrissian made a name for himself as an extraordinary sabacc player. In one of his most lucrative games ever, Lando played in a game with the Administrator of Cloud City in the Bespin system. His luck not panning out, the Administrator made a desperate last bet -- his position.

With the turn of a few cards, Lando won and the now former Administrator slinked off, stripped of his title and power. Convinced that the scoundrel cheated during the game, he vowed to get his money back. Using his seedier contacts (and what money he had left), the former Administrator hired the dreaded bounty hunter, Bossk, to hunt down Lando and extract revenge.

Calrissian had made his way to the Bespin system and was holing up in its largest settlement, Cloud City. Knowing that his target would be well protected, Bossk did something unusual for a bounty hunter and brought along some muscle -- an unsavory band of mercenaries and cutthroats -- to help him deal with any problems that might arise. Bossk and his crew managed to slip through Cloud City's security and planned an ambush for Lando.

Setting up the ambush in one of the Maintenance Decks, Bossk sabotaged some vital equipment, then hacked into the city's computer and sent an urgent message to Lando under the guise of the city's Chief Engineer. The message claimed that a primary repulsorlift pod was on the verge of breaking down, risking a cataclysmic failure that could cause the entire city to plunge through the clouds of the gas giant planet.

Lando responded immediately, but having grown cautious since taking on the mantle of Administrator, he brought along several guards and a bodyguard. When the group entered the Maintenance Level, the blast door slammed shut, preventing them from leaving. Blaster fire erupted all around Lando and his entourage, forcing them to duck for cover. Interference from the repulsorlift machinery prevented Lando from using his communicator, and he soon discovered that the Maintenance Deck's communication stations weren't working, either (thanks to Bossk's sabotage). Knowing that another access port was on the other side of the room, Lando realized he had no choice but to fight and try to make his escape.

AGENTS OF DECEPTION

Slaving, spice mining, smuggling, gun-running... whenever there is demand for a product, someone will supply the goods. As the Galactic Civil War between the Rebel Alliance and the Empire continues, the forces of law and order struggle to control the growth of the lucrative and dangerous smuggling market. A large shipment of ryll is missing, and both sides are looking for it. The Alliance wants to return it to the medical facility it was intended for, and the Empire wants to impound it as contraband.

Light Side Campaign: Return Medical Supplies

Despite Lando Calrissian's new status as a legitimate businessman, winning the title of Baron Administrator of Cloud City, he keeps close to his roots in the underworld. Join Lando as he makes a clandestine journey to Smuggler's Run, a hidden collection of asteroids serving as a hideout for hundreds of smugglers. While Lando seeks to get his hands on the shipment of a lifetime, become embroiled in an Imperial and Rebel conflict for that same precious cargo.

Scenario 1: At the Palace With a cover story from Lando, infiltrate Jabba's fortress on Tatooine.

Lando Calrissian, the Baron Administrator of Cloud City, arranges a meeting aboard his shuttle, the Cobra. Calrissian makes you feel comfortable and says, 'A shipment of ryll headed for a medical facility became... misplaced.' The Baron grins. 'Smugglers can turn a tidy profit selling ryll to the right people. This is a very large shipment. I'd like you to help me recover it.'

'Will we make sure the Alliance gets this ryll to that medical facility?' you ask. 'Certainly,' replies Calrissian, with a wave of his hand. 'The less-than-scrupulous days of my career are behind me.' He offers you a datapad and identity card. 'This is your cover, a smuggler from Glakka. I'll give you some chemical agents to obtain warheads to bargain with. Get an invitation to Jabba's Palace. Some of that scum must know about the shipment.'

The Hutt's palatial home is a hive of criminal activity. You gain entry as a smuggler looking for work. Eyebrows rise with interest (for those who have them) when you ask about a missing shipment of ryll. Somebody names a ryll smuggler on Corellia, but you get no information about the shipment.

As you mingle, a nasty-looking Chevin comes your way. It's Ephant Mon, Jabba's head of security. 'I hear you were on Glakka,' he begins. 'Remember that Imperial that got killed? What was his name... Jeffren Brek?' You laugh and say, 'Sure, I remember him, what an idiot.' Mon replies, 'Too bad. Brek was never there, and he's not dead. You're a liar.'

You can't rescue your story, so you make a break for it. 'Stop that fool!' yells Mon. You're going to have to fight your way out of Jabba's Palace.

You're not sure if it's your quick feet and combat skills or the heat of a chase across the dunes of Tatooine, but eventually Ephant Mon gives up.

'Come back here again... and you'll never... leave alive!' he hollers, panting heavily. It's an empty threat, probably to impress the guards that came with him.

All you care about is that you're alive and anxious to leave Tatooine. You have a tip to follow up, that ryll smuggler on Corellia. Time to get to the spaceport.

Scenario 2: Red Circle Gang Track down a ryll smuggler on Corellia to find out what he knows.

In the city of Kor Vella on Corellia, you meet Lon Cope, a CorSec lieutenant who investigates ryll smuggling. You ask him about the missing shipment and give him the name you obtained at Jabba's Palace.

'If anybody is gonna know about a shipment of ryll, that's Ubis Reendorr,' says Cope when he hears the name. 'That Rodian works with the Red Circle Gang. They have a hideout where they refine the ryll. I've been trying to crack that place for some time.'

'Just get me a meeting with Reendorr, and we'll go from there,' you ask. 'I can't make you any promises about the bunker.'

'We've got a man in the organization,' replies Cope. 'He has unauthorized access to obtain access data cards. I'll set it up.' The next day the officer hands you an invitation to meet with the Rodian smuggler. The note is signed with a single red circle.

Soon, you meet with Ubis Reendorr at a small cantina in Kor Vella. After some small talk, he leans in to say, 'Someone is smuggling a spice known as ryll into Kor Vella. Oh yeah, that's me.' He laughs at this, and you try to laugh as well. 'What do you know about a large missing shipment of ryll?' you ask.

The Rodian leans back in his chair. 'The question,' he begins, pointing a finger in the air, 'is not what I know.' Thugs all over the room kick back their chairs and stand. Reendorr points at you. 'The question is - what do you know?' You're surrounded now, with all exits blocked. 'And I think you're gonna tell us. With a little persuading.'

Even though they surrounded you, with the element of surprise, the Red Circle Gang wasn't very tough. The few that stayed to fight now litter the floor of the small cantina. Pulling one to his feet, you ask, 'What kind of security do you have at the bunker?' The one you're holding spits in your face. Another gang member says from the floor, 'It's tight! You can't get in without an access card.'

Reendorr groans at this comment. 'Why don't you tell them everything, bonehead?' You drop the thug you were holding, who hits the floor with a thud. Walking over to Reendoor you say, 'I bet you've got one of those.' With a disgusted sneer, he hands you the card. Your CorSec friend will be happy to have it.

Scenario 3: Imperial Entanglement Follow a lead from the Bothan Spynet to find an Imperial officer in Bestine.

The access card you obtained pleases Lieutenant Cope. 'This will tell us about their security,' he says. As you leave, Cope says, 'Wait - there's a message for you.' He shows you a comm console, where you see Calrissian. 'The Bothan spynet is following an Imperial officer who's looking for the shipment,' he says. 'Meet Loza Sil'ban in Bestine.' Cope says, 'You may need some help for this, so I'll give you someone to call for a favor so you can get smuggler backup.'

You enter the warehouse district in Bestine. On a deserted corner, a Bothan woman steps from the shadows. 'Calrissian sent me,' you say. Sil'ban nods. She walks down an alley and motions for you to follow.

'I've been tailing this Imp officer, Jeffren Brek,' she says. No wonder your cover was blown when you agreed he was dead. She climbs on boxes and peers in a

window. Joining her, you see an Imperial officer that must be Brek. He speaks to a spacer in a flight suit. A few stormtroopers stand nearby.

The meeting finishes and the spacer leaves. 'I'll see what Brek knows,' you say. Sil'ban asks, 'Talk to the Imp? Think that's wise?' You answer, 'I have to.' She says, 'You're on your own then. Good luck.' The Bothan disappears into the shadows.

You enter the warehouse and the troopers level their blasters at you. 'Hey! I'm just a merchant from Glakka,' you say. 'I heard you're looking for a ryll shipment.' Brek motions for them to put their guns down.

'You're from Glakka?' Brek asks. 'Do you know Zoort?' You shake your head. 'Raurlu Eloz?' You reply, 'Uh, no.' He pulls out his pistol. 'I don't think you're a merchant,' he says. 'I think you're a Rebel spy.'

You strike down the last stormtrooper, and Brek raises his hands. 'Okay, I surrender.' You take his weapon and throw it aside. 'What do you know about the missing shipment of ryll?' you ask. 'No more than you do,' he says. 'That's why I was talking to that spacer.'

'Turn around,' you say to Brek. You put him in restraints and say, 'Give me the spacer's name.'

'He's a Corellian pilot named BoShek,' he answers. 'What are you gonna do with me?'

'I'll take him in,' says Loza Sil'ban, stepping from the shadows. Surprised, you say, 'Thanks,' and head out to look for BoShek.

Scenario 4: Kessel Runner Locate the mysterious spacer that the Imperial officer was talking to.

Jeffren Brek had no useful information. If the Imperials are looking for the shipment too, then time is running out. You return to Bestine to look for the Corellian pilot the Imperial was talking to.

After a few hours, you're approached by a cloaked Bothan. Loza Sil'ban removes her hood, and you can see she's injured. 'Brek got away,' she says. 'Conked me on the head and stole my blaster. I'm sorry.'

'That's alright,' you say. 'It's the shipment we're after, not him. Are you okay to travel?'

'Yes, I'm fine, just embarrassed,' she says. 'I checked with the Bothan spynet about BoShek. Rumor has it that he set a new record for the Kessel Run, taking bragging rights from Han Solo. He's also been known to traffic in illegal transponders. Ran afoul of the Imps, so Brek must have been pretty desperate just to talk to him.'

'Thanks,' you say. 'Now all I have to do is find this BoShek.' Sil'ban says, 'Call a favor for smuggler backup if you need it.' She leaves again, and you head for another cantina. Walking down the street, you feel a tap on your shoulder. 'I hear you're looking for me.' BoShek stands behind you, still wearing his flight suit. You wonder if he ever takes it off. 'Why yes,' you begin. 'I'm a merchant from Grakka-'

'You're looking for a big missing shipment of ryll,' says BoShek. He looks at you strangely, and somehow you feel like he can read your mind. 'I'm looking for that shipment too - and that makes you competition.' He pulls his blaster, a few of his friends reveal themselves nearby, and you have a firefight on your hands.

'You win,' says BoShek, throwing down his blaster. 'Now what are you gonna do? I know you won't kill me,' he says. 'That means you can't threaten me either.' He still seems to be reading your mind.

'Shut up and put your hands on your head,' you say. Then you frisk him for weapons and find a datafile. You thumb the activate button, and it shows a flight plan. 'The planet Wrea?' you ask. BoShek says, 'I'm telling you nothing.' You say, 'I'll just turn you over to the Imperials. There are several warrants for your arrest.'

BoShek's face turns pale. 'Okay, if I tell you where the shipment is, will you let me go?' he says. 'Talk,' you reply. 'Smuggler's Run is an asteroid belt near Wrea. The shipment is in a hideout on Skip 52,' he says. You find a maintenance closet and throw BoShek inside. 'Cool your heels in here, hotshot,' you say. 'I won't tell the Imps where you are. For a while, anyway.' Then you close the door and lock it.

Scenario 5: To Smuggler's Run Travel through an asteroid belt full of criminals to find the missing shipment.

You contact Calrissian with an update. When you tell him your destination is Skip 52 in Smuggler's Run, he raises an eyebrow. 'Navigating that belt is nearly impossible, and rock storms surround that asteroid,' he says. 'I'll arrange for a pilot to meet you there.'

Soon, you're at the spaceport on Wrea. You stand near a two-seater Z-95 Headhunter and a pilot in a floppy hat greets you. 'Nice disguise,' you say to Wedge Antilles. 'Rebel officers are unwelcome here,' he says. 'Take these counterfeit credits. We can use them to get credit sticks.'

You board the snubfighter and when Antilles punches the throttle, you realize this is no ordinary Z-95. 'She's got uprated engines and extra maneuver thrusters,' he says. He does a sideslip that makes your stomach turn.

While your fighter dodges the asteroids and the skipper vehicles that the locals use, you hold on to your lunch for the whole trip. Antilles makes the final approach through a hailstorm of rocks and lands inside a hollowed-out asteroid.

You see a hundred ryll crates stacked to the ceiling. Lying on the ground are many dead smugglers. Standing around them are some shadow stormtroopers and a few heavily armed agents - Imperial Security Bureau operatives.

From the corner of the chamber walks a mechno-assembly. Projected above it is a strange holographic figure. 'We have visitors,' says the image. You realize that this is the head of the ISB, a mysterious figure called Blackhole. You'll have to overcome this elite band of soldiers to recover the shipment.

The agents and stormtroopers put up a terrific fight, but finally the battle turns in your favor. With nowhere to retreat, the Imperials fight to the death. Blackhole's mechno-assembly lies on the ground, damaged in the firefight. His holoprojection flickers and buzzes as he says, 'You've made a new enemy today. I'll make you regret ever crossing my path!' Then the holo fizzles and fades. 'He gives me the creeps,' says Antilles.

'Let's contact Calrissian and get this shipment back where it belongs,' you say. In a few hours, Calrissian arrives with a small freighter and the ryll is loaded aboard. He looks at the many crates and says, 'A man could make a fortune selling this to the right buyer.'

'Remember, Lando, you're a respectable baron administrator now,' you say, eyeing him curiously. 'Yeah, that's right,' he says with a sigh.

'Don't worry; I'll make sure this gets to the medical facility.' He smiles and says, 'It's a new Lando Calrissian that stands before you today.'

Dark Side Campaign: Locate Missing Contraband

Working for the Imperial Security Bureau, you must track down a medical shipment of ryll before it falls into the wrong hands. Rebel hands. The trail has gone cold at Jabba's Palace, and the ISB wants you to infiltrate the crime syndicate and track down the cargo. The trail leads to Smuggler's Run, which is not a favorite destination among Imperial officers. The hundreds of smugglers who live there make short work of any authority figure that wanders in. As you track this cargo, you will cross paths with a Rebel strike force and a group of renowned smugglers, all going for the same treasure.

Scenario 1: Majordomo Get a false identity from your Imperial contact and enter Jabba's Palace on Tatooine.

Jeffren Brek, a captain with the Imperial Security Bureau, meets you at the Mos Eisley spaceport. He offers you a datapad and ID card. 'The bureau has created an undercover identity for you. Here is some false information that you can use to get classified data discs to bargain with. This should get you into Jabba's Palace where you can find out more about the ryll. I'll be investigating some other leads myself, but get back in touch with me when you can.'

The next day, disguised as a smuggler, you hold your ID card up to the gatekeeper droid at Jabba's fortress in the Dune Sea. After some disagreeable squawking, the droid finally opens the door.

You mingle with the many criminals circulating inside the palace. Posing as a simple 'merchant' from Corellia looking for work, you ask about the missing ryll shipment. Many are interested, but none has any information for you.

You're enjoying a private concert by Max Rebo's band when you feel a tap on the shoulder. Jabba's majordomo, Bib Fortuna, crooks a finger at you and you have no choice but to go with him. 'New here, aren't you?' asks the Twi'lek. 'Sorry I couldn't meet you at the door. Come with me.'

He takes you into a private office with a couple of guards nearby. 'Let's talk about your experience.' Fortuna listens in sinister fashion while you try to remember the details of your cover story. You think it's going well until he says, 'I make it my business to know things about people like you. I'm unfamiliar with all of the references you've supplied.'

The Twi'lek rises to his feet. 'I do have a job for you though - rancor food.' He presses a button under the table, and the guards run into his office. You're not going to talk your way out of this.

You fight your way through Fortuna's guards and make your way to the vehicle hangar. Next to Jabba's massive sail barge is a swoop bike, and you jump on and fire it up. Cranking the throttle you blast out of Jabba's Palace and head towards Mos Eisley. You quickly reach the limit of your swoop piloting skills, and barely manage a crash landing in a dead end alley. Bruised and battered, you dust yourself off and call this a fine escape.

Scenario 2: Alley Arrest Face a tough CorSec officer while trapped in a dead-end alley in Mos Eisley.

You're in a dead-end alley in Mos Eisley. Your crashed swoop bike is beyond repair. You wait for a few moments to make sure that Jabba's guards haven't followed you. During your investigation, you scored chemical agents that you can use to get some chemical warheads. When you finally decide to leave the alley, several figures step in your way. Judging from their body armor and the blasters they're packing, you figure you're in big trouble.

One of them steps forward. 'Major Walden, CorSec,' she says, showing you an ID badge. 'We'd like to ask you a few questions about a missing ryll shipment.'

'I'm just a simple merchant-', you begin. 'That's enough,' she interrupts. 'We know you're a smuggler. There's a warrant out for your arrest on Corellia.' Your cover story wasn't good enough to convince Jabba's majordomo, but it's good enough to get you arrested by CorSec.

You quickly evaluate your options. Explaining to her that you're not really a smuggler and actually working undercover for the Imperial Security Bureau doesn't seem like a good choice. They have your exit blocked, so you'll have to fight your way out.

With your back to the wall, you put up a fierce defense. When the fighting stops, you look around to see you're the only one standing. You take a moment to search the CorSec agents, and find a datapad on Walden. Some of them start to wake up, so you rush out of the alley. You compose yourself and try not to act like a wanted criminal as you stroll away as quickly as possible.

Scenario 3: Rebel on the Trail Get the jump on a group of Rebels looking for the same shipment you are.

When you're convinced that the CorSec agents aren't following, you take a moment to examine the datapad you took from them. The warrant for your smuggler cover story details quite a career, and you wonder if it's based on a real criminal. If things get worse, you can always call Lando for a favor and get some smugglers to help.

Another file describes an Alliance major named Coret Bhan who's on the trail of the ryll shipment. Walden was supposed to meet him at a landing pad here in Mos Eisley. Looks like she's going to be late for that meet, but you still have time to check it out. You decide to contact Captain Brek to give him an update, but he's not available. Perhaps he's following up on a different lead.

When you get to the landing pad, you hear the whine of blaster fire. Peeking around the corner, you see Bhan and a few Rebels holding smoking pistols. Lying on the ground around them is what seems to be a band of smugglers. Some of them were carrying crates. They were probably trying to leave the spaceport.

The Rebels look tired and wounded. You decide this is a good a time to get the drop on Coret Bhan. Arming yourself, you step around the corner. 'I have a message from Major Walden,' you say. 'She's going to be a little late. I left her bleeding in an alley.' This gets the attention of the Rebels, but you're aiming at their leader. 'Tell me what you know and I'll be nicer to you.'

'Here's what I know,' says Bhan. 'I don't deal with scum like you.' In a flash, he readies his blaster and fires. The battle begins.

The Rebel commandos put up a strong defense, but they're weakened from the previous firefight. Soon, you're the only one left standing. Major Bhan survives, and you grill him for information. 'What do you know about the missing ryll shipment?' His answer is nothing but an angry glare.

You turn your attention to another Rebel, wounded and lying in a pool of blood. He looks young and scared. Before you can ask him anything, he blurts out, 'When the Major meets Han Solo on Corellia, they'll get that ryll before you do!' Bhan says, 'Shut up, corporal!' You smile and give a salute to the wounded Rebels. 'Thanks boys, I'll be moving on now.' They're too weak to do anything about it.

Scenario 4: Tag the Scoundrel Confront Han Solo and some of his friends in a cantina on Corellia.

You travel to Corellia and try to deduce where you can find Han Solo. As a former smuggler, he could be found in a back-street cantina full of criminals. Lately though, Solo has been respectably working for the Rebel Alliance. You suppose his shady past will keep him out of the finer places, so you choose establishments somewhere between elegance and villainy.

Using unauthorized access, you obtain a few account access data cards to bargain with. Garbed in your smuggler persona, you have to visit only a couple of cantinas before you find Han Solo. He sits at a table alone and when you approach, he seems puzzled. 'Hey actually I'm waiting for somebody, so move along, buddy.' You smile and say, 'I just need a few moments of your time. How about a round of drinks?' Solo grins and says, 'Okay, now you're talking. Have a seat!'

You steer the conversation to the subject of the missing ryll shipment. 'I'm sure lots of people would be interested in something like that,' says Solo. Someone stops by and whispers to him. You recognize Solo's friend and fellow smuggler Col Serra.

A look of surprise crosses Solo's face and he looks at you. His hand goes to his blaster. 'Looks like you bushwhacked the guy I was supposed to meet,' he says. You see a few Rebels enter the cantina with blasters drawn.

'You got me all wrong, Solo,' you say. 'I'm a businessman, that's all.' He says, 'Why don't you tell us who you really work for?' You can see this conversation is going nowhere.

You're able to subdue Solo and his Rebel friends. Picking himself up off the floor, Solo says, 'Alright, let's call this off and call it even. I've got a few other deals going, so losing this one is no big deal.' You back off and decide to let him go - especially since you've planted a homing beacon on him.

Scenario 5: Meet the Baron Find the shipment in a dangerous asteroid belt and battle the smugglers that are loading it.

Han Solo leaves Corellia and heads for the planet Wrea as you follow him with your homing beacon. The asteroid belt known as Smuggler's Run is in the same system, and that's where Solo goes. This belt is home to hundreds of smugglers, and nearly impossible to navigate. While you're there, you call a favor to find some smugglers to help.

You hire a fast light freighter and a hotshot pilot who takes you into the Run to find Solo. 'This is gonna cost extra,' says your pilot when you determine Solo's destination - an asteroid called Skip 52. 'It's surrounded by rock storms, and getting in there will be tough,' the pilot says. 'I'll give you a thousand extra credits if you get us in there safely,' you tell him. He seems satisfied.

After a terrifying final approach, your pilot sets the freighter down in a hollowed-out asteroid. In a large chamber, you find Lando Calrissian, Han Solo, and a group of Rebels beginning to load crates of ryll aboard the Millennium Falcon. This is the missing shipment that the ISB is looking for.

Occupied with loading the cargo, the Rebels don't notice your arrival. You position yourselves to arrange the ambush. When everyone is ready you shout, 'I'm taking possession of this shipment.' They stop loading the crates, but don't throw down their blasters. 'You again,' says Solo. 'You don't give up easy, do you?'

'Put down your weapons and nobody gets hurt,' you say. The two ex-smugglers exchange a glance. 'Not a chance,' says Calrissian. The Rebels draw their blasters and choose to do things the hard way.

Blaster bolts ricochet all around the cavern as the firefight continues. You gain the upper hand and it looks like the Rebels have no chance. Solo and Calrissian decide to cut their losses and run up the ramp to board the Millennium Falcon. They'll get away with a few crates of ryll, but you'll capture the rest, so you let them go.

In a few days, you're delivering the ryll shipment to Captain Brek in Mos Eisley. 'I have to admit, I brawled with those smuggler thugs, and they got the best of me,' says Brek. 'You've done a good job and a service to the Empire.'

THE SHADOW SYNDICATE

The Rebel Alliance uses any means to move supplies beneath the notice of the Galactic Empire. Swoop racers transport their teams from planet to planet, providing a cover for Rebel movements. The Falleen prince Xizor owns a transport company looking to sponsor a swoop team. His Black Sun agents investigate Alliance activities so Xizor can reveal them to the Emperor. Xizor focuses on star driver Kimmi Chyler, who hired Dash Rendar to provide transport.

Light Side Campaign: Supply the Alliance

Kimmi Chyler is the most successful female swoop racer in the sport. Originally from Corellia, and she has outraced both Han Solo and Dengar on the Agrilat circuit. Dash Rendar, the famous Corellian smuggler, has hired out his light freighter Outrider to provide transport for Kimmi and her team. The Rebel Alliance has contacted Rendar about transporting valuable cargo as he moves from race to race on different planets. When Imperial officers, Sith lords, and even Prince Xizor of Black Sun become suspicious, traveling with Kimmi becomes more dangerous with every passing day.

Scenario 1: Under Arrest Dash Rendar wants you to guard his starship while he provides security for a famous swoop racer.

Dash Rendar has contacted you with an offer of employment. You travel to the planet Lok and meet the famous Corellian pilot at the starport near Nym's stronghold. 'Ever heard of Kimmi Chyler?' he asks. 'She's a real crackerjack swoop racer. Anyway, she's hired me to provide transport for her team.' Dash

picks up his drink and leans back in his chair. He seems quite pleased with himself.

'So what do you want me to do?' you ask. 'You'll be providing security,' says Dash. 'Just keep an eye on my ship during the race.' You wonder why Dash needs security for a simple transport contract, but the money is too good to turn down.

The next day, you're at the landing pad where Dash's ship is parked. A tall woman walks down the ramp, wearing a leather racing outfit. 'Who the frink are you?' she asks. 'I'm security,' you reply. 'Whatever,' she says. 'Just stay out of my way, laserbrain.' She hops aboard a swoop and blasts out of the landing pad. 'A real people person,' says Dash from the top of the ramp. 'Stay here and protect the ship. I'm going to watch the Lok Marathon.'

You step inside and find a repair droid in the cargo hold. 'Welcome to the Outrider,' says the droid, standing over an open crate. 'I am Leebo.' Inside the crate, you see military body armor. The droid hastily closes the lid. 'Perhaps you could guard the ship from the outside,' says the droid.

At the bottom of the ramp, you are met by an Imperial officer and several stormtroopers. 'Captain Jeffren Brek. Step aside, I'm here to inspect this ship,' says the officer. He's not regular army. You're thinking perhaps Imperial Security Bureau. 'You have no right to board this ship,' you reply. 'Swoop racing is illegal,' says the officer. 'You are under arrest for crimes against the Empire.' As you arm yourself, you think, 'No amount of money is worth this.'

Eventually you gain the upper hand in the firefight. 'Leave us alone, Brek! You've got nothing on us!' you cry. The Imp soldiers are wounded and ready to retreat. Captain Brek looks around to assess the situation. Then he motions to his troopers to fall back.

'This isn't over!' he says, backing away. 'I know what Rendar is up to!' You aren't even sure what he's talking about, but you're glad they didn't board the Outrider. 'I knew the money was too good to be true,' you think to yourself.

Scenario 2: Sith Shadows Rendar makes a deal with the Rebel Alliance and you have to defend the Outrider from a Sith lord.

The Outrider leaves Lok on the way to Rori for the next race. You join Leebo and Dash in the cockpit. 'What have you done to make the Imps chase after you?' you begin. 'I hear swoop racing is illegal,' shrugs Dash. 'Besides, they're always stickin' their noses where they don't belong.' He grins broadly. 'What about that cargo you're carrying?' you ask. Dash turns to face you and pokes a finger in your face. 'Look here, buddy, you're just supposed to protect the ship, not ask questions.'

When you leave the cockpit, you find Kimmi in the hallway. She's idly shuffling a sabacc deck with both hands. 'You play?' she says. 'A little,' you reply. She smiles. 'C'mon, you might learn something.' An hour later, she owns every credit you brought aboard. 'I did learn something,' you say. 'Never play sabacc with a card shark.' She laughs and picks up her winnings. You don't see her again before Rori.

Before the Narmle Memorial Rally gets underway, Dash meets with two shady characters at the starport. They take possession of the crate of body armor, and Dash takes a shipment of bacta kits aboard. You can't be sure, but all your instincts tell you that the Outrider is transporting supplies for the Alliance. When Dash's Rebel friends take their leave, you notice a pair of Sith Shadow agents following behind.

Dash and the team leave for the race, and things are quiet at the landing pad for most of the day. Hours later, the team is out celebrating Kimmi's victory when you hear some suspicious noises. Arming yourself, you see the Sith Shadows step into the open. 'We don't have to do this the hard way,' one of them says. 'Yes we do,' you say as you begin your attack. Leaping over a stack of crates is a tattooed Sith lord, igniting his lightsaber and joining the fray. 'You'll never leave here alive!' he cries.

As the Sith Shadows take more casualties, their will to continue begins to ebb. You have battled their Sith leader to a standstill. 'Do you think for a moment that the Empire doesn't know what's aboard that ship?' asks Namman Cha. 'I think you're not going to find out tonight,' you reply. One of the Sith Shadows breaks away in a rout, and the Sith turns off his lightsaber. 'You've chosen the wrong side,' says Cha. 'Soon, you'll pay for your lack of vision.' Then he leaps away.

You hear Dash and Kimmi laughing as they enter the landing pad area. Dash looks around to see the signs of a struggle. 'What happened here?' he asks. 'A Sith lord attacked, demanding to know what's on board. Is there anybody who's not after you. Dash?' you ask. 'Everybody wants to ride with vapebait,' says Kimmi, as she punches Dash in the arm and laughs.

Scenario 3: A Good Night The boss of your boss wants to play sabacc, and you go with her to keep her safe.

The Corellian moon of Talus is your next stop. You arrive in the city of Nashal, and Kimmi is dressed to kill. 'I want to play sabacc. You'd better come with me,' she says. She walks into town, knowing that you'll follow. After all, she is your employer's employer.

You find the largest casino in town, where Kimmi sizes up the competition. A Twi'lek in garish jewelry comes in the front door. 'Show me to the high-stakes sabacc table,' he commands. Two greasy thugs accompany him.

Kimmi heads for the same table as the Twi'lek. Your card shark smells blood. 'Welcome,' he says. 'I am called Lonay.' They take a seat, and you exchange meaningful glares with Lonay's thugs. The dealer droid begins, and several hands progress without incident.

Crowd whispers say that Lonay is a Vigo - an important lieutenant in the powerful Black Sun criminal organization. He has wagered all his credits on a final showdown. Kimmi reveals a pure sabacc, and the Vigo loses.

Kimmi scoops up her winnings while Lonay fumes. 'No jumped up Corellian dirt farmer swoop jockey beats me at sabacc!' he bellows. His boys hustle him out of the casino.

'Did you have to beat him that badly?' you ask Kimmi as she cashes in her winnings. 'Is there any other way?' she asks. 'This could get rough,' you warn as you make your way to the door. You don't go far before Lonay and his thugs bar your way. 'You had a skifter,' he says to Kimmi. 'You're a cheat and a liar!'

Before you can do anything, Kimmi grabs your arm and runs toward a nearby swoop. She jumps on and you can't do anything but join her. Lonay and his thugs hop into his XP-38, and a high-speed chase through the streets of Talus begins.

Kimmi swings your swoop into a dead-end alley and punches the throttle. Lonay's speeder follows just behind. You're sure she's going to hit the wall at full speed when she stands on the braking vanes and the swoop heads straight up out of the alley. The speeder is not so lucky, and hits the wall hard.

Kimmi hovers for a second to appreciate the wreckage. 'Don't bring a landspeeder to a swoop race,' she says. Lonay holds his head as he rolls out of the speeder and hits the ground. He shakes his fist at Kimmi. She blasts the throttle again and you can barely hold on as she speeds back to the Outrider. 'It's been a good night. Won a sabacc game and a street race,' she says with a laugh. 'Good thing we're leaving tomorrow,' you say.

Scenario 4: Human Replica Assassin Droid You're in over your head as Dash meets with Bothan spies and a bad-tempered droid attacks.

The next race is on Corellia, at the famous circuit that winds through the crystal swamps of Agrilat. This is Kimmi's home track, the place where she beat Dengar and Han Solo. She spends more time than usual getting her swoop ready to race. You're looking forward to a little down time when Dash approaches. 'I want you to come with me to Kor Vella,' he says. 'I'm supposed to watch the ship,' you say. 'You're security,' says Dash. 'Come along and keep me secure.'

Dash soon leaves the nice part of town and heads toward a shady district. Ahead, you see a couple of Bothans on a street corner. 'Stay here and keep a lookout,' says Dash as he continues to meet them. Trying to stay discreet, you hear them talking about an 'Imperial datafile' and something about 'battle plans.' Not for the first time in Dash's employ, you feel like you're in over your head.

The Bothans leave and Dash rejoins you. 'Let's get back, they said they were being tailed,' he says. 'We're looking for you, Rendar,' says a woman's voice from behind him. You see a group of armed thugs led by a young blonde woman. 'Me?' says Dash in his most innocent voice. 'Why me?'

The woman strikes downward with her fist and smashes in the roof of a nearby landspeeder. 'Don't play stupid, dirt flyer!' she says. 'My name is Guri. Black Sun wants some answers.' She picks up the wreckage of the roof in one hand

and flings it at you like a toy. You don't know who or what she is, but this is going to be a tough fight.

'She must be some kind of droid,' you say to Dash as Guri pounds a hole in the wall of a building. 'I've never seen a droid like that.' says Dash. As the fight continues, the Black Sun thugs become casualties or flee the scene. Eventually, Guri decides she's had enough. 'Black Sun is going to find proof of your crimes, Rendar,' she says.

She's not even winded after all this intense combat. She can't be human. 'The Empire will pay well for that information.' Then she runs away into the darkness. 'I hope we never see her again,' says Dash. 'I have a feeling we will,' you reply.

Scenario 5: Kill Them All When Dash delivers important data to a Jedi, Prince Xizor of Black Sun attacks.

On Tatooine is the final swoop race of the season. Kimmi has won enough races that if she wins Mos Espa, she'll capture the championship. A lavish party is presented by Xizor Transport Company, and Kimmi is invited. Dash will escort her and you'll provide backup. The company is owned by a Falleen prince named Xizor who is looking to sponsor a swoop racing team.

When you arrive at the party, you're stunned to see the replica droid Guri at Xizor's side. Kimmi chats with the Falleen and Guri smiles quietly.

'Does Xizor know who Guri works for?' you whisper to Dash. 'She works for him. He's a Vigo in Black Sun,' says Dash. 'Then what are we doing at a party thrown by a gangster?' you ask. 'No questions, remember?' says Dash as he returns to Kimmi.

After the party, you stop by a cantina in Mos Espa. Kimmi seems taken with Xizor. 'Did you hear what he said about me?' she asks with dreamy eyes. It's like he has some kind of magical power over her. 'Stow it girl, I don't want to hear it,' you reply.

A hooded figure enters the cantina and walks to a back room. Dash grabs your arm and follows. He hands a datapad to the other man, who removes his hood, revealing Luke Skywalker, hero of Yavin. Luke looks at you for a moment, and decides you're not a threat.

'The Alliance is indebted to you,' he says to Dash. 'These files will save many lives.' Suddenly a lightsaber springs to life in Luke's hand. Xizor and Guri enter the room. 'Not when that datapad belongs to me,' he says. 'Take the files, Guri. Kill them all.'

The battle rages on, and eventually spills out into the streets of Mos Espa. The night is lit by the flashes of Luke's lightsaber as he spins to block blaster bolts. You strike down Xizor with one mighty blow, but as he lies on the ground, Guri steps forward to protect him.

Xizor gets up groggily and wipes blood from his chin. 'We're done here,' he says to Guri. 'We've found out enough about Rendar's involvement, and I'm sure the Emperor wants to know about Skywalker.' With Guri protecting Xizor, the two of them take their leave.

'They don't have any proof, do they Dash?' you ask. 'Nah, they're just talking tough, that's all.' He claps a hand on your shoulder. 'You did good, kid.' Kimmi gives you a smile. 'You've done everything we asked you to do, and more.' Luke puts away his lightsaber and shakes your hand. 'Thank you again for helping us.'

Dark Side Campaign: Expose the Traitors

The Empire suspects that the Rebel Alliance is using swoop racing to move supplies and personnel secretly from planet to planet. The Imperial Security Bureau believes that Dash Rendar, the famous Corellian smuggler, is the key to this Rebel operation. He has hired out his light freighter Outrider to provide transport for famous swoop racer Kimmi Chyler. You will be working alongside Imperial officers, Sith lords, and even Prince Xizor of Black Sun to expose Dash Rendar as a Rebel traitor. Along the way, you will battle against swoop gang thugs, Bothan spies, Rebel troops, smugglers, and a young Jedi named Luke Skywalker.

Scenario 1: Delivery for Captain Rendar Find out what cargo Dash Rendar is carrying at the swoop race on Lok.

Captain Jeffren Brek from the Imperial Security Bureau contacts you to arrange a meeting. A few days later, you arrive at the Imperial outpost on the planet

Lok. Brek escorts you to a briefing room, where holodisplays illustrate the situation he presents to you.

'Here are vids of Rendar speaking with known Rebel operatives,' says Brek as he clicks through a series of incriminating holos. Then he shows a young female swoop racer accepting a trophy. 'The smuggler is providing transport for Kimmi Chyler's swoop racing team. The first race is the Lok Marathon, just outside of Nym's Stronghold right here on Lok.'

Brek provides you with datafiles on Rendar and Chyler, including the swoop race itinerary for the current season. You discover that Rendar is fond of a sickly sweet pastry called Smuggler's Delight. Developing a cover story for a courier service, you make your way to the landing pad where Rendar's ship, the Outrider, is located.

The pilot and his repair droid stand working at an open access panel. 'Delivery for Captain Rendar,' you announce. 'We aren't expecting any... hey, is that Smuggler's Delight?' asks Rendar. You say, 'I'll just put this inside,' and walk into the ship's cargo hold. You see an open crate of Rebel-issue body armor as you set the box down.

Then you pull your weapon and walk out to face Rendar, saying, 'You are transporting military supplies. You're a part of the Rebel Alliance, and a traitor.' Rendar innocently holds up his hands and says, 'I'm just here to transport Chyler's racing team.' The repair droid drops a hydrospanner with a clang. At that moment, Rendar quick-draws his blaster and the firefight begins.

Dash Rendar is not the kind of smuggler who dumps his cargo and runs, and he's handy with a blaster. The fight turns into a stalemate, and you decide that you've found out what you want to know. The Corellian pilot retreats into his ship, and you make a break for it.

You return to the Imperial outpost and report to Captain Brek. 'I could have taken him out,' you say, 'But I figured you'd want to know what I found.'

'Just as we suspected. Rendar is transporting supplies for the Rebels. Good job returning with the information. If you'd gotten killed in the firefight, we'd never have known for sure,' he says. 'The swoop races have moved on to Rori. Meet with Namman Cha there and he'll provide your next assignment.'

Scenario 2: No Trouble Impersonate a swoop racer to identify Dash Rendar's Rebel contacts.

At a secluded location on Rori, moon of Naboo, you meet with the Sith lord Namman Cha. An imposing figure clad in dark crimson robes, Cha examines you for a moment. Perhaps he is probing your mind. His tattooed face is impassive and his eyes have an eerie reddish glow.

'From time to time,' he begins, 'I am tasked by the Emperor to work with the Imperials.' He says this as if he has a bad taste in his mouth. 'As I have shadowed Rebel movements in this sector, I see more and more of this Corellian pilot, Rendar, with each passing day.'

The Sith sighs heavily. 'I'd prefer to simply destroy him, but we need you to discover who his Rebel contacts are.' Cha hands you a racing outfit and helmet. 'Your cover identity will be a rookie swoop racer. Get close to Rendar and find out who his contact is. Then report back to me.'

The next day, you are at the track for the Narmle Memorial Rally. Dressed in your racing leathers and carrying your helmet, you look for Kimmi Chyler's team. 'Are you the rookie?' asks a woman's voice from behind you. When you turn around, you see Kimmi Chyler sizing you up. She smiles and says, 'Try not to get in my way.' Then she turns and walks away. She returns to her swoop and the rest of her team. There, you see Dash Rendar.

You follow Rendar when he leaves the track. Behind one of the grandstands, he gives a package to a Zabrak wearing a long duster. 'Do you guys work for a racing team?' you ask as you approach, with one hand on your weapon.

'I'm here to watch the race, friend, just like you. I don't want any trouble,' says the Zabrak. You recognize him as an Alliance officer. 'No trouble at all, Major Bhan? I think you're here to smuggle for the Rebels!' you say as you draw your weapon and attack.

Coret Bhan may be a major in the Alliance, but his combat skills are as good as any Rebel soldier in the field. You have him pinned down, but it'll be too dangerous to try to kill or capture him now. You remember what Namman Cha wanted from this mission, so you decide to disengage.

When you meet again with the Sith lord, he is pleased with your report. 'The Major? I've heard of him more than once,' says Namman Cha. 'If he's involved, this is a larger operation than I originally thought.' The Sith pauses in thought for a moment. 'The next race is on Talus. Go there and find Lonay, he's a Vigo from Black Sun. Tell him I sent you.'

Scenario 3: A Better Card A Black Sun Vigo wants you to exact his revenge for a sabacc game loss.

When you arrive at Nashal on Talus, the Twi'lek Vigo Lonay is not hard to find. Gambling at the casino, drinking at the cantina, or dining at a fine restaurant, Lonay's passion seems to be spending credits.

The Vigo's bodyguards make a wall in front of him when you approach. 'He don't want to talk to you,' one of them says. 'Namman Cha sent me,' you say, looking for Lonay's reaction. The Twi'lek raises an eyebrow and parts the wall of thugs. 'Easy boys,' he says. 'Come on friend, let's talk.'

Sitting across the table from Lonay, you see that he has bumps and bruises on his face, head, and arms. 'I've had a recent... setback at the sabacc table,' he begins. 'The cheater that took my credits still needs to be taught a lesson. You want the job?' Lonay gives you a look that shows he can be dangerous when crossed. 'Yes, Vigo,' you respond. 'Good. If Cha recommends you, you'll get the job done. The Corellian woman, Kimmi Chyler. Show her what it means to embarrass a Vigo.'

You find Kimmi at another cantina, dressed in an evening gown. She is playing sabacc again, and still winning. You wait patiently until she leaves. Following her into an alley you say, 'I have a message for you from Vigo Lonay.' Then you pull your weapon.

Kimmi doesn't seem to recognize you. She also doesn't seem to be afraid. 'You're going to kill an unarmed woman?' she asks. Then she drops her handbag. She rises with a hold-out blaster in her hand. 'There's always a better card on top of the deck,' she says. This is going to be harder than you thought.

Kimmi Chyler handles herself in a firefight almost as well as she does at the sabacc table or the track. The battle becomes deadlocked, and eventually she escapes to her swoop and races away into the night.

When you tell your story to Lonay, she turned tail and ran, barely escaping with her life. 'You took her down a notch!' laughs Lonay. 'Listen... I want you to go to Corellia and meet with Jix. He's one of the other racers who'd love to see Chyler crash and burn in the next race. Just like me!' The Vigo laughs again, and so do his bodyguards. It seems you've pleased Vigo Lonay enough that he won't put a death mark on you, so it's time to take your leave.

Scenario 4: Secret Meeting In the crystal swamp of Agrilat, you find Dash Rendar talking to a Bothan spy.

The crystal swamp of Agrilat on Corellia is the site of the next swoop race. When you find Jix and his swoop racing team, they are more like a gang than a bunch of gearheads. When you tell him about working for Lonay on Talus, he nods his head. 'Sure, I want to win this race, and if something happened to Chyler, that would help my team,' he says. 'Tell you what... you're hired as a mechanic. Get some gear from one of the guys and go snoop around her swoop. It's got some illegal modifications, I'm sure of it.'

You're not concerned with Lonay's vendetta or Jix's victory in the Agrilat race. However, working for Jix you can find out more about Rendar's smuggling operation. The Imps and that Sith will welcome anything you can give them on the secret Alliance activities going on.

You secure the welding goggles that came with your mechanic's outfit. You hope that Chyler and Rendar won't recognize you. As you approach the pit area, you see that she is out doing test laps on her swoop. Rendar is there, and for the moment, nothing seems suspicious.

When Rendar leaves the pit alone, you follow him. He walks along the track until he gets to a turn called the Sink Hole. You have to duck when he looks around to see if anyone is watching. Then he goes into the swamp. At a desolate, secluded location, he meets with Koth Melan, a member of the Bothan Spynet.

You overhear Melan say, 'There are agents of the Empire here on Corellia. We must be careful.' He gives Rendar a datapad, which the Corellian examines closely. 'In fact,' adds the Bothan, raising his carbine, 'There is one watching us.' Then he aims right at you. You wonder if Bothans are strong in the Force as you dive for cover.

During the battle, the Bothan is wounded. You hear Melan say to Rendar, 'I said, go on! Get away if you can. I'll be alright.' The Corellian stops for a moment, and then runs for the race track. You choose not to follow and approach Melan, who throws up his hands in surrender. 'The Empire will be glad to have you in custody,' you say. Melan says nothing as you place him in binders.

In a few hours, you're transferring the Bothan spy to Captain Brek in the city of Bela Vistal. 'Good work,' he says. 'There have been new developments. I've been in touch with Black Sun, and arranged for you to meet with Skahtul on Tatooine.'

Scenario 5: The Trap Is Sprung Join forces with a Barabel bounty hunter to track down Luke Skywalker.

The last swoop race of the season is at Mos Espa on Tatooine. Long ago, major pod racing events were held there, but now only the swoops race. In a dark corner of a cantina in the city, you meet with your contact, the Barabel bounty hunter Skahtul. 'I have a contract from Xizor,' she begins. Her voice hisses through her many sharp teeth. 'The bounty is on Luke Skywalker.'

Skahtul pauses to await your reaction, and then continues. 'I have tracked him here to Tatooine.' A waitress approaches your table, and the Barabel bares her teeth to hiss at her. The waitress drops her tray and runs away. Skahtul continues, 'Xizor Transport Company is providing several large sand barges from which spectators can watch the race. I will kill Skywalker when he arrives aboard Xizor's personal barge.' She looks at you and adds, 'With your help, of course.'

The luxury sail barges are thirty meters long, and accommodate dozens of passengers. Only the finest criminals from Tatooine are aboard Xizor's barge, dressed in their most expensive clothes. The Vigo holds court on the elevated rear deck. Xizor's assassin droid Guri stands by his side and eyes the crowd carefully.

Finally, you spot Skywalker, moving quietly toward the aft of the barge. Skahtul steps in front of him, armed with a heavy blaster pistol. 'At last, Skywalker, we meet,' she hisses. Women scream and criminals scatter out of the way. Skywalker says, 'Your attempts to track me down have succeeded. However,

this will not end the way you expect.' With a snap and a hiss, his lightsaber ignites. You suspect he has lured you into a trap, and not the other way around.

Every time you gain the upper hand, Skywalker leaps aside or swings his lightsaber in a deadly arc and the battle begins anew. An errant blaster bolt hits the steering vane for the sail barge, and it slowly careens out of control. Screaming passengers cling to any available railing as the barge crashes to the desert surface.

You and Skahtul are thrown aside, landing in a dune nearby. When you regain your feet and look around, there is no sign of the Jedi. 'It's not over between me and Skywalker,' says Skahtul. 'We fought him to a standstill, despite his Jedi tricks and lightsaber,' you tell her. 'Only the crash of the sail barge enabled his escape.'

The Skulls

The swoopers in the gang called the Skulls like to create mayhem, such as crashing into a crowd of spectators. Corellian Security wants you to bring in their leader, Jeng Seth.

Through an intermediary, you are contacted about a meeting in Mos Espa on Tatooine. Little information is provided so you don't know what to expect.

In a dark cantina, you meet with a hooded figure who escorts you into a back room. When she pulls back the hood, you see Major Alana Walden of Corellian Security.

'The Mos Espa swoop race is this weekend,' she says. 'One of the gangs racing there is called the Skulls. They don't come to this part of the galaxy often.'

She produces a datapad with holos illustrating what she's saying. 'The Skulls like to create mayhem. At the Lok race, they ran their swoops into the crowd and killed 24 spectators. This is a rival swooper beaten to death by Jeng Seth, leader of the Skulls.'

Walden puts away the datapad. 'I could go on, but let's just say that I'd like to see Seth put away for good. That's where you come in.'

After negotiating a price, you are at the Mos Espa track looking for the Skulls the next day. Screams and blaster fire make their gang easy to find.

'Jeng Seth?' you say to the man who is their leader. The violence stops for a moment as the swoopers look at you.

'Who's asking?' says the gang leader.

'I'd like a word with you,' you say.

'I'd like to shoot your head off, you stupid gundark!' says Seth, and his gang members laugh out loud.

'I figured as much,' you say, drawing your weapon. The brawl begins.

Man for man, the Skulls are tough customers. But like any gang, they're disorganized and out of control. In the end, they're no match for your trained combat skills.

'They'll have me back on the street in an hour,' says Seth as you put restraints on him. 'My gang always has my back.'

'That's not my problem,' you say. 'I get paid for turning you in. What happens after that is not my concern. Of course, if you escape, they'll pay me to catch you again, so I'd hate to see something bad happen to you, friend.'

THE NIGHTSISTER'S REVENGE

A Force-sensitive Nightsister exile has made a new home deep within the icy caverns of Hoth. She uses mind control over a pack of wampas to devastate nearby installations and steal supplies. Her manipulation of the beasts is so complete that both the Jedi and the Empire want this knowledge, or at the very least to remove the Force-user as a threat to the people living on the surface.

Dark Side Campaign: She Will Be Sith

Search for a renegade Nightsister on the desolate snow planet of Hoth. Get your mission from a Sith adept and battle against a Jedi Knight. Encounter a Rebel captain and discover a secret Rebel outpost. Fight against the beasts of Hoth and their dangerous mistress.

Scenario 1: A Brief Encounter A Sith adept tasks you with the job of finding a Nightsister from Dathomir who is now on Hoth.

You receive a message from Namman Cha, a Sith adept you have dealt with before. 'Meet me on Hoth,' he says, and that transmission provides exact coordinates. A planet in the Anoat sector - a remote part of the Outer Rim territories - Hoth is a desolate, snow-covered ice world.

'I have tracked a gifted Force-user to this worthless planet,' says Namman Cha when you meet with him. 'A Nightsister from Dathomir.' He hands you a datapad showing a holo of a rancor walking through a canyon. Mounted on the rancor is a woman wielding an energy lance.

'You came all this way just to find her?' you ask.

'She is strong in the Force,' says Cha. 'Kyrisa is her name. She will be a powerful ally and serve the Emperor as I do.' His stern look says it's not wise to ask more questions. He thumbs the datapad and it displays a holo search grid. 'I'll take this quadrant. You take this one. Stay in touch.'

After a few hours of searching with your electrobinoculars, a green flash catches your attention. Increasing magnification, you see a lone figure dispatching a Hoth hog with a lightsaber. You approach carefully, but the figure easily senses your presence and soon you meet.

The Twi'lek woman drops her weapon to the side, but does not deactivate it. 'I am Rachi Sitra,' she says. 'I don't want to fight you. I'm looking for an exiled Nightsister.' Her feet are wide apart in a combat stance.

'I too search for this Nightsister,' you say. 'I will take her to the Emperor.'

The Jedi raises her lightsaber and grips it with two hands. 'I don't think so,' she says as she leaps to attack.

With a kick, you knock the Jedi off her feet. She jumps up in a flash. 'Neither of us has to die,' she says, stopping the fight for a moment. 'Let's go our separate ways and see who finds the Nightsister first.'

You watch her carefully, but she seems to be sincere. 'Alright then, that's it,' you say. 'The Nightsister will be a Sith soon enough.'

With a salute, she backs away. In a few moments, the swirling snow obscures her completely. It's time to return to your search.

Scenario 2: Mounted Patrol Encounter a Rebel patrol riding tauntauns, led by two members of Renegade Squadron.

The wastes of Hoth are nearly featureless. As you continue to explore your assigned quadrant, occasionally there are caves but none are large and all are vacant. Only a few times have you seen indigenous creatures like snowmice or an ice scabbler.

The next beast you see is a tauntaun and it catches your eye because it's carrying a rider. He's wearing what looks like Alliance cold weather gear. There are several in the party, and you start wondering why there would be Rebels on Hoth. They're too well-armed to be regular troops. You suppose they could be SpecOps, but probably SpecForce. Arming themselves with blaster carbines, they fan out to cover your position.

One of them rides forward, putting his goggles up. 'You're gonna have to tell us what you're doing here,' he begins. You recognize him as Captain Han Solo, a hero of the battle of Yavin.

'I don't think this planet is under Alliance control,' you reply. 'I don't think I have to tell you anything.'

'We can't let you go back to your Imperial pals now,' says Solo. 'Look, just come back with us and we can sort things out. This doesn't have to get messy.'

'Actually,' you say drawing your weapon, 'it does.' The battle begins.

The battle lasts until the wind and snow make it impossible to continue. A storm on Hoth puts a halt to any kind of outdoor operation. You don't have to

answer Solo's questions, but you didn't find out what they were doing here either.

You remember a small cave you passed before the encounter with the Rebels, and take shelter there to wait out the storm.

Scenario 3: Wampa Attack Discover the largest of the indigenous reptomammals on the planet Hoth and find out why few live to tell the tale.

After the storm clears, you step outside to get your bearings. A Hoth snowfall completely changes the local terrain configuration, so electronic positioning is the only way to avoid getting lost.

Your comlink activates. 'Captain Jeffren Brek, ISB. Hold your position, we'll be there soon.' Brek arrives on foot with a small party of agents. 'The ISB is interested in this Force-user as well. Blackhole has some theories about beast mastery and espionage.'

He hands you a datapad using his cybernetic arm. 'This is the search grid we've been covering.' You indicate where your search has progressed so far. You also brief him about the Jedi and Rebels you encountered. Brek is surprised. 'If they're looking for Kyrisa too, we'd better get a move on.'

The roar of a distant beast interrupts your planning. You exchange worried glances with Brek and the other agents. You hear another roar, followed by a roar from a second beast. Swirling winds make it difficult to determine their direction.

'Over there,' you say, pointing to a ridge at the north. A wampa appears at the crest, and then a second one. A titanic roar, much louder than any you've heard yet, shakes the ground and your confidence. Then, the head of a gigantic beast appears above the ridge. It's a wampa, but much larger than any that have ever been reported.

'Genetic engineering,' mutters Brek. 'That's another of Kyrisa's specialties. That beast isn't natural.' You form a battle line and prepare to defend against a pack of vicious wampas.

After the smaller wampas were dealt with, you were able to focus your efforts on taking down the giant beast.

Hamstringing the huge wampa limited the range of its deadly claw swipes, and eventually it tired enough that you could deliver a killing blow.

Scenario 4: Queen of Beasts The Nightsister exile wants revenge for the death of her pets, and she brings many friends.

The lifeless bodies of the wampas cover the ground surrounding your location. Their blood runs red in the snow. The gashes from their claws cut right through your body armor and cold weather gear.

Some of the ISB agents take claws or teeth as souvenirs. One of the agents rubs his head and says, 'That thing swatted me with its big paw and I was out like a light.'

Brek says, 'They stun you and take you back to their cave. Then kill you later.'

The agent asks, 'I thought they only hunted when they were hungry?'

Brek says, 'They do what that Nightsister trains them to do.'

Suddenly a voice rings out across the plain. 'You have slain my prize. Now you will pay the price!' Standing on a ridge, you see the figure of a lone woman holding a bladed staff high over her head. Dressed in white and blue cold weather gear, her face has the red tattoos of the Nightsisters of Dathomir.

You have finally found Kyrisa, the exiled beast master. Her face fills with anger, and her red eyes smolder with rage. A pack of Hoth beasts joins her on the ridge. They seem to obey her commands, like an army of trained soldiers. 'Kill them, my pets!' she screams.

Breaking through the ranks of beasts that surround Kyrisa, you knock her down. She springs up with a Force jump and assesses the situation. It's obvious that many more of her pets have been slain, and the battle is going against her. Warily, she backs away and the beasts that remain form a line to cover her retreat. Kyrisa escapes into the blowing snow and you're too tired to follow.

Brek gathers up his agents and says. 'I'll track the Nightsister. You go back to where you saw those Rebels and try to find out more about why they're here.'

Scenario 5: A Small Outpost The Rebel patrol leads to a small military facility, and you meet with another famous Alliance officer.

Checking your datapad, you retrieve the coordinates for your encounter with Solo and the Rebels. You return there with no incident. Recalibrating your comlink to known Alliance frequencies, you detect Rebel chatter.

Heading in that signal's direction, you stop to search with your electrobinoculars. For a brief moment, you see a Rebel mounted on a tauntaun on a ridge. Then he disappears from view.

Approaching carefully, you lay down to look over that ridge. Below, you see a handful of temporary structures and many stacks of boxes and supplies. A dozen or more Rebel troops are working to assemble a small outpost.

You pull back from the ridge to avoid detection. Looking down the ridge through the blowing snow, you see another Rebel patrol. You have nowhere to hide, so you stand and ready your weapon.

The leader of the party approaches and dismounts, blaster at the ready. She pushes back her parka and you recognize Leia Organa, former senator and now officer in the Rebel Alliance. 'You need to tell me what you're doing here,' she says.

'That's just what I was going to ask,' you reply. 'Nice little facility you're constructing.'

'You know we can't let you leave,' she says, leveling her blaster in your direction.

'You know I can't let you capture me,' you say as you begin your attack.

You're able to battle Organa and her SpecForce elite troops to a standstill. However, it's only a matter of time before reinforcements arrive from that outpost. When there's a lull in the fight, you make a break for it. The Rebels are wounded enough that they can't follow, so they don't pursue.

After putting some distance between you and the Rebel patrols, you contact Jeffren Brek. 'Did you get any vids?' he asks. 'No. Nothing concrete. All I have is a recording of some comm chatter. It wasn't safe to hang around.'

'What about Kyrisa?' you ask.

'No sign of her,' says Brek. 'She knows her way around this frozen rock better than anybody.'

A few days later, you're with Brek aboard the Devastator when he reports about your operation to his superior, General Nevar. 'Rebels on Hoth? All I have is your word for it?' asks the general. 'What could they be doing on such a worthless planet? I'm deleting your reports. This ridiculous adventure was a mistake from the beginning!'

As a result of Nevar's error in judgment, the Imperials didn't know about the base that the Rebel Alliance was building on Hoth... until over a year later.

Light Side Campaign: Find the Nightsister Meet a Jedi knight on Dathomir and begin a search for a deadly Nightsister exiled to the ice planet Hoth. Battle against Imperial snowtroopers and dangerous Hoth beasts. Defend a secret Rebel outpost against an Imperial walker attack.

Scenario 1: Unfriendly Competition The Singing Mountain Clan hoped to capture the renegade Nightsister on Dathomir, but now you must travel to Hoth.

You receive a comlink transmission from Rachi Sitra, the Jedi Knight. 'Meet me on Dathomir. I'll be at Singing Mountain.' When you arrive, Rachi greets you and escorts you to Augwynne Djo, leader of the Singing Sisters.

'The Singing Mountain clan is in constant conflict with the Nightsisters, another clan of Force-users here on Dathomir,' begins Augwynne. She activates a holo of a Nightsister riding a rancor. 'This one is Kyrisa,' says Augwynne. 'She became such a threat to her own clan that they exiled her. She is perhaps the most dangerous of all.'

'We hoped to capture Kyrisa here on Dathomir,' says Rachi. 'However, she has been sent away and now she is on Hoth.' Then Rachi looks at you. 'You and I will go there and find her.'

A few days later, you join Rachi on Hoth. Far on the edge of the Outer Rim, the planet has no cities and no spaceports. 'We'll have to split up and follow a strict search protocol,' says Rachi. 'Stay in communication and report on the hour. Good luck.'

For hours, you find nothing but harsh winds and bitter cold. You spot a large, hog-like creature, roaming alone. It suddenly charges away into the swirling snow. Getting closer, you see a lone figure with a red lightsaber battling the Hoth hog. He easily kills the beast.

Then the mysterious figure looks at you. Sith tattoos streak his face. 'I am looking for a Nightsister,' you call to him. 'Have you seen her?'

The Sith smiles. 'I search for the same woman,' he says. 'For my own reasons. Which, I am sure, differ from yours.' Then he executes a mighty Force leap and attacks.

Your battle with the Sith adept continues with no clear victor. Then you knock away his lightsaber and he leaps away to recover it. 'As much as I'd like to kill you,' he says, out of breath. 'My mission is to find Kyrisa.' Backing away he adds, 'I will turn her to the dark side and she will serve the Emperor!'

You are too exhausted to follow, and you must save your strength if you are to find the Nightsister before the Sith does. It's time to report to Rachi.

Scenario 2: Defend the Outpost Discover the secret Rebel base under construction on Hoth and fight back when Imperial troops attack

When you report to Rachi with a description of your encounter with the Sith, she tells you to stay there and she will be there soon. 'I was concerned that you might be injured,' says the Jedi knight when she arrives. 'That Sith must certainly be Namman Cha. You did well to fight him to a standstill.'

Rachi's comlink buzzes again, and she talks on it for a moment. 'I've been in touch with a Rebel SpecForce unit on Hoth,' she says. 'They have a small outpost in need of security.'

'I'll help the Rebels,' you say, 'Go look for Cha.' She gives you the coordinates for the outpost and then she quickly leaves.

Near the Rebel camp, you meet with a mounted patrol on tauntauns. 'Rachi Sitra sent me,' you tell them. 'We've been expecting you. Come with us,' says the sergeant.

They bring you to Major Bren Derlin, the chief of operations for the Rebel outpost. 'There have been reports of Imperial activity on the east ridge,' he says. 'Take a squad to investigate.'

Staying just behind the ridge for cover, you peer through your electrobinoculars. The wind and snow let up for a moment, and you see two Imperial snowtroopers. 'I've got 'em,' you say to the rest of the squad. Leading the cold-weather soldiers is Jeffren Brek, an ISB officer.

You move quickly toward their position but can't catch them unawares. They spot you and get ready for battle. 'Take some prisoners,' you say. 'We need to find out what they know.' Blaster shots are exchanged and the firefight begins.

The battle goes well. Your Rebel squad is SpecForce trained and most capable. Before you can surround Brek's troopers and force them to surrender, the weather kicks up again. This storm is a bad one. Not only do you fail to capture the Imperials, you are separated from your troops.

Scenario 3: Seeking Shelter Driven into a cave to escape the ice storm, you find a huge unnatural beast in its lair

Survival is your primary concern at this point. Nobody can withstand an ice storm on Hoth, so you have to find some shelter. You discover an icy cave in the side of a hill and duck inside to wait out the storm. The harsh winds whip past the cave entrance.

Rachi told you that there were deep caves of thermal activity on Hoth, and some stranded travelers found enough warmth there to keep alive for days. You see a passage that leads deeper, so you decide to follow it.

You jump at the squeaks of a few snowmice that scatter away down the passage ahead of you. The smell of animals gets stronger and then you stub

your boot on an ice scabbler carcass. The light from the cave mouth is starting to fail this far inside, and you struggle to see what's ahead.

The passage branches in two directions and you decide to go right. As the tunnel turns sharply, you step off a ridge in the poor light and fall a couple of meters with a thud.

You can tell you're in a larger chamber, but it's dark. You hear a snorting sound. Then another. Then a squeal like a pig. You can make out the shapes of a couple of Hoth hogs. Then behind them is another hog, larger than any you've seen or heard of. Suddenly they all snort and squeal, and they charge to attack.

The vicious, close quarter combat finally ends when you administer the killing blow to the giant Hoth hog. You have heard that Kyrisa is not only skilled in training beasts, but she dabbles with genetic engineering. That is the only explanation for the oversized creature that you just narrowly defeated.

Scenario 4: Mother of the Beast The one who made the giant beast you slayed now demands satisfaction.

With the pack of hogs now dead, the cave is quiet again. You find a path from the chamber you've fallen into that leads back to the cave entrance. Following back along the way you came in, you're relieved that you no longer hear the winds whistling past the mouth of the cave.

Snow covers your exit, but digging through the mound is not difficult. The storm has relented, and the winds are now quiet. You break through into the sunlight, and soon you're standing by the cave that saved your life.

'My Maraki is gone,' says a woman's voice from behind you. You turn to look up the hill and see Kyrisa, the exiled Nightsister, standing on top. 'You have slain one of my children,' she says. Her red eyes flash and the tattooed streaks on her face contort with anger.

'I took shelter from the storm,' you say. 'The beasts attacked and I defended myself.'

'Enough of your lies!' she screams. At her side now are two fierce wampas. 'You invaded their home and murdered them!'

It's obvious she's going to attack any second. You ready your weapon as she says, 'You will die like all the humans on this planet! Hoth belongs to Kyrisa!' She throws her arms forward and her deadly menagerie attacks.

Kyrisa's beasts are well trained and fight to the death to defend her. Still, the battle turns against the exiled Nightsister and she jumps on the back of a hog to make her escape.

'Your fate is sealed!' she cries. 'I will find you again to exact my revenge!' Then she rides away into the swirling snow.

Scenario 5: Walker Attack Back at the Rebel outpost, the Imperials attack again with a small detachment of vehicles.

Your comlink buzzes, and the message is from your squad of Rebels. 'We have your location,' says one of them. 'Sit tight, we're on the way.' Soon they come into view, and you happily reunite with the troopers. 'Thought we'd lost you,' says the young lieutenant.

'Not that easily,' you reply. On the way back to the outpost, you entertain them with your heroic tales of battling Kyrisa and her beasts. When you arrive at the camp, Major Derlin wants a full report. You tell the story one more time, but now without so much embellishment.

Then Captain Han Solo comes in from a patrol, riding a tauntaun. He quickly dismounts and says, 'Walkers coming. Small ones, but any walkers are trouble.' Derlin starts barking out orders, and a well-rehearsed defensive plan springs into motion. Troopers take positions along the perimeter of the outpost, and you join the ones on the edge where Solo came from.

About a kilometer away, you see Imperial vehicles advancing. A pair of AT-PTs - the small, one-man walkers - approaches side-by-side. Your troops have heavy weapons that should be able to take out these lightly armored vehicles.

A squad of snowtroopers runs with the walkers on foot. Your troopers open fire with their blaster rifles and send them running. Your heart sinks as you see a larger walker coming up to support. It's an AT-ST, and its twin blaster cannons are already blazing away at your position.

Your SpecForce heavy weapons have crippled the Imperial walkers. The snowtroopers are still putting up a good fight, and you've lost many good men. Finally, Hoth decides to end the battle with a roaring blast of ice and snow. The force of the wind blows over one of the crippled walkers with a crash. The battle ends as the storm engulfs both armies. You run with the Rebels back to the temporary shelters in the outpost.

There's no way to tell what happened to the Imperials until the storm blows over. After about an hour, you can finally make your way outside the outpost perimeter to examine the battlefield. One of the AT-PTs is missing, carried away by the fury of the wintry blast. Few of the Imperial bodies remain, and none is alive.

Several patrols are formed to reconnoiter the immediate area. No signs of the Imperials are found. With nowhere to hide, they were swept away by the full force of the storm. For now, the Rebel outpost on Hoth remains concealed from the Galactic Empire.

THREAT OF THE CONQUEROR

The Conqueror, an Imperial Star Destroyer, is armed with a planet-destroying weapon like the one on the Death Star battlestation. The Rebels of Col Serra's Renegade Squadron will battle the Imperial Storm Commandos of Admiral Victor Strang to end the Conqueror's threat to galactic peace!

Light Side Campaign: Renegade Squadron

Renegade Squadron traverses the galaxy looking for an Imperial secret weapon that outfits devastating technology on a single Star Destroyer. This breakthrough will serve as a replacement for the Death Star battle station lost at Yavin IV. The Jedi have assigned key personnel to help the Rebels in their search.

Scenario 1: In the Shadows A simple mission to take out an Imperial weapons depot on Naboo leads to a startling revelation.

Your exploits in the battle against the Galactic Empire have been recognized. Col Serra, one of the leaders of the Rebel unit called Renegade Squadron,

contacts you. You meet him at a small camp in the forests of Naboo. 'We're gettin' ready to raid a weapons depot,' says Serra.

'What kind of weapons are we looking for?' you ask.

'Sorry buddy,' he says with a laugh. 'Every mission can't be about saving the galaxy. Taking out this depot will hurt the Imps on Naboo, and that's all we're after.'

Renegade Squadron has an excellent reputation among Rebel special forces units. The commandos you meet are rough around the edges and not regular military. However, you're impressed by the way that a few words from Serra get them ready for action. Planning for the operation is simple and effective, and there are no questions. They work together like a well-oiled machine.

Soon, you're on a ridge spying on the depot with electrobinoculars. 'That's Sarkli,' you say.

'Captain Sarkli?' asks Serra, taking the binoculars.

'He's a leader of an elite group of commandos,' you say.

'This is gonna be tougher than we thought,' says Serra. 'Storm Commandos,' he says to the Renegades, and their grim looks show that they know what he's talking about.

Your troops get about halfway across the broken terrain to the north of the depot building when the Imperials sound the alarm. From the roof of the building, you can hear Sarkli say, 'Get off your butts, men. We're under attack!' Blaster shots force you and the Renegades to take cover, and the firefight begins.

Sarkli's Storm Commandos put up a good fight, but Renegade Squadron gets the upper hand. You take control of the weapons depot as Sarkli and his men escape into the wilderness. Inside, there are dozens of crates of weapons and ammunition. The Renegades begin to take inventory, examining each crate in turn.

The only office in the building has a small safe, which one of the Rebels opens with slicer gear. 'Datafiles,' he says, holding up a fistful of the plastic cartridges.

'Let's take a look.' you say as you shove one of them into the computer console. A holo appears of an Imperial Star Destroyer.

'Just another ISD,' says Serra.

'Wait,' you say as the image rotates. 'Look at the bow. That weapon is not standard issue.'

Serra switches off the console and pulls out the datafile. 'Alright, collect all these files and we'll have the slicers look 'em over. We're done here. Renegades.'

Scenario 2: Behind the Shroud A research facility on Naboo is your next target, and it's guarded by an unexpected adversary.

You watch over the shoulder of a tech as she examines the data from the weapons depot. Data streams across her screen, and the holo of the Star Destroyer rotates nearby.

'What is that weapon?' you say, pointing at the bow of the image.

'I'm not sure,' she says. 'But it's big. Really big.' She scrolls through more data and stops with a gasp. 'It's a superlaser. Like the one on the Death Star.'

'Watch,' she says, as the holo shows a green beam from the prow of the starship. 'There are beam generators here and here,' she points, 'They focus here.' She points at where the beams converge.

'This weapon was developed at a research facility here on Naboo,' says Serra.

'Then that's our next target,' you say.

Soon, Renegade Squadron breaks into the facility. You move through testing bays and fabrication chambers looking for the main control room. You hear the hiss and hum of a lightsaber. You see a single figure dressed in dark Sith robes, bathed in the red light of the weapon.

'This is as far as you get,' says the man you recognize as Sith Acolyte Namman Cha. 'The eradication of Renegade Squadron will keep this facility's secrets safe.'

'We came here to find out more about that superlaser,' you say.

'You have no idea what you're dealing with,' says Cha. With a powerful leap, he closes the gap between you and the battle begins.

The ferocity of Nam man Cha is impressive, but your superior numbers begin to take their toll. The Sith decides that escape is preferable to death. With another impressive Force leap, he bounds skyward to crash through a skylight and run away into the night.

You enter the main control room of the weapons facility. Your slicers download all available data from the consoles there. As the data streams are collected, one of them says, 'Conqueror.'

'What?' you ask.

'That's the name of the Star Destroyer with the superlaser,' he says. 'It's called the Conqueror.'

'Now we know what to look for,' you say. 'It can't be that hard to find a starship that's sixteen hundred meters long.'

Scenario 3: Blackguard Battle When you try to hijack a shuttle on Mustafar, an unusual alliance between the Blackguard Dark Jedi and Imperial intelligence stands in your way.

The green beams converge again, forming a single destructive blast. Again, you watch the rogue moon blow into a thousand million fragments, crowned by a ring of exploding energy. No matter how many times you watch the holo, it chills you. 'This is what it must have been like to watch the destruction of Alderaan,' you say.

'Except that this was a small, uninhabited planetoid in the Mustafar system,' says Serra. 'Still, the power of this weapon is incredible.'

'Now that we know there's been a successful test, we have to move quickly,' you say.

One of the techs speaks up. 'According to the timestamps on these recordings, the Conqueror should still be in the Mustafar system.'

'We have to find a way to get aboard,' you say.

Soon, you're on Mustafar, talking with a Rebel intelligence officer. 'Supply shuttles travel from the surface to the Conqueror once each day,' he says.

'If we can hijack one while it's grounded, we can get aboard,' you say.

Just before dawn, Renegade Squadron is in position, ready to attack when the shuttle lands. A speeder shows up with a squad of local Blackguard Elite Minions. Ysanne Isard, director of Imperial intelligence, leads them.

'If they're working together, this must be important,' says Serra. 'We'll have to take 'em out before the shuttle lands.'

You can hear Isard talking to the Blackguard. 'This operation is of the highest importance to the Empire,' she says.

'That's why we're here,' you say. She turns to face you, and the firefight begins.

'Fall back!' says Isard, as she retreats to the Blackguard speeder. They lay down a volley of suppressive fire that keeps you pinned down. The Renegades are unable to pursue as the Blackguard survivors jump into the speeder and it flies away.

'Alright men, focus on the mission,' says Serra as he slams a fresh energy cell in the grip of his blaster rifle. 'Get back into position now!' Once again, the expert commandos of Renegade Squadron deploy under cover around the perimeter of the site.

When the shuttle arrives, your plan works to perfection. The hapless crew is subdued, and soon you are putting on their uniforms and boarding the shuttle to complete your infiltration.

Scenario 4: Fall of the Conqueror Aboard the Conqueror, you head for the reactor core, where you must battle the ship's captain and his squad of Imperial commandos.

'Admiral Strang?' asks Col Serra as your shuttle travels on autopilot from the surface to the Conqueror. 'Victor Strang? He's the captain? He used to lead a team of Storm Commandos,' says Serra. 'Stay sharp, men. This will be no ordinary boarding action.'

Identifying codes are exchanged and the shuttle lands in the huge docking bay of the Star Destroyer. Your uniform disguises provide a moment of surprise, and a quick firefight takes out the stormtroopers there.

'Aft to the reactor core,' you say as you head down a passageway. The rest of Renegade Squadron follows, shedding their shuttle crew uniforms on the way.

Navy troopers are swept away as your team approaches the reactor. An alarm horn begins to blare and red emergency lights flood the corridor. Blast doors shut ahead of you, blocking your path.

Serra waves a hand forward, and two of the Renegades apply a strip of thermal detonator tape on each side of the door. 'Three, two one,' says one of them, and everyone falls back to take cover. Two loud bangs are followed by one of the blast doors clanging to the deck.

When the smoke clears, you see an Imperial officer wearing commando body armor. 'Isard warned me you were coming,' he says. 'I am Victor Strang. This is my personal guard,' says the admiral, brandishing a heavy blaster rifle towards a squad of commandos behind him. 'This is my ship. You're not taking her from me.'

'We're not here to capture your ship,' you say. 'We're here to destroy it.'

'I like that even less,' says Strang with a laugh. Then he steels himself and says, 'Defend yourselves.' The battle begins.

The battle between two special forces teams is brutal and swift. Renegade Squadron employs overlapping supporting fire to gain the upper hand, and you see Strang give his troops the order to fall back. Before you can pursue the admiral, another blast door clangs shut behind him. 'Let him go,' you say.

Serra says, 'Set those charges on the reactor, men.' Your medics treat the wounds from the firefight as the demolition experts do their jobs. 'Timers set sir,' says one of them. 'Back to the docking bay,' says Serra.

Scenario 5: No Chance The demolition charges are set, but blocking your escape from the doomed Star Destroyer is a formidable Force-sensitive opponent.

With the timers set on the demolition charges that will destroy the Conqueror, Renegade Squadron rushes through the Imperial Star Destroyer to get back to the docking bay. The plan is to commandeer a shuttle and then escape the starship and return to the surface of Mustafar.

The alarms are still blaring throughout the massive starship. You encounter resistance from Navy troopers and stormtroopers at several critical junctions. They are no match for the heavy firepower carried by your team, so you're making good progress.

However, ten precious minutes have expired by the time you reach the docking bay. The shuttle that brought you to the Conqueror is still there. 'We're going home on the shuttle that brought us here,' says Serra.

Although there are several groups of workers throughout the huge hangar, your team heads straight toward the shuttle with no time to lose. Before you can board, you're stunned to see a massive, armored, cloaked figure stroll down the landing ramp.

'Vader!' says one of your men. 'What's he doing here?' whispers another.

'As I said, they will return here,' says the dark lord of the Sith. From inside the shuttle, a squad of elite stormtroopers gathers. 'Your plan is foiled,' says Darth Vader. 'I am here to see that the Emperor's new superweapon is safely delivered to him.'

And we are here to destroy this ship,' you say. 'Detonation charges are set on the reactor core. You'll never get there in time.'

'We'll see about that,' says Vader. 'Either way, you have no chance of leaving this ship alive!'

'No chance?' says Serra, raising an eyebrow. With a quick wave of his hand, the Rebel commandos attack.

The firefight ebbs back and forth as the clocks on the detonators move toward the explosions that will destroy the Conqueror. When the Sith Lord and his stormtroopers take cover beneath a Lambda-class shuttle, your Renegades fire missiles into the starship.

In a sudden explosion, fire and debris engulf Vader and the Imperials. 'Get to the shuttle!' you say, and your team boards the same starship you arrived in. In moments, the tiny starship blasts out of the docking bay.

Several tense moments go by as you wonder if your shuttle can get far enough away to escape the explosion. Then, you begin to wonder if the charges are going to explode. Two other starships escape from the Star Destroyer in these fleeting seconds. A TIE advanced starfighter and then an Incom gunship blast out of the docking bay.

At long last, massive explosions tear through the hull of the Conqueror and a cheer goes up from the Renegades aboard your shuttle. Secondary blasts pop off in a spectacular display as the Star Destroyer begins to break into pieces.

'Looks like the end of Darth Vader,' says Serra with a grin.

'I don't think so,' you say. 'That TIE was probably his ship. In addition, I wonder if Strang was on that gunship. Either way our mission is a success, and the Conqueror is no longer a threat.'

Dark Side Campaign: Storm Commandos

With information that the Rebel Alliance has recruited new special forces units such as Renegade Squadron, the Emperor assigns the Imperial Storm Commandos to shut them down. Sith overseers accompany the Imperial special forces to ensure success.

Scenario 1: Wrong Place, Right Time Down time and training exercises for the Imperial Storm Commandos are canceled when a crack team of Rebel soldiers leads a surprise attack.

Your success in operations against the Rebel Alliance brings you to an Imperial special forces team in a remote region of Rori. Between assignments, this group of Storm Commandos awaits repairs to their starship at a small Imperial facility.

After your briefing with Captain Sarkli, the unit commander, you spend some down time meeting with the soldiers. They're spending this time with maintenance to their equipment and running training simulations.

An alarm sounds throughout the repair facility. 'A team of Rebels is attacking the outpost!' says an Imperial lieutenant.

'I bet they didn't expect to find a team of Storm Commandos!' you say.

'Should be a good training exercise,' says the lieutenant with a grin.

You grab your weapon and head for the roof. You can see the Alliance assault ship landed a few hundred meters away. The Rebels are forming up at the bottom of its landing ramp.

Captain Sarkli is there, examining the attackers with his electrobinoculars. 'Looks like Renegade Squadron,' he says. 'I see Col Serra. He's one of Han Solo's buddies. Get ready for a tough fight.' Sarkli puts down the binoculars and grabs his blaster rifle as the other Storm Commandos take up firing positions.

'We're in the wrong place at the right time. Let's take care of this upstart Rebel unit once and for all,' you say.

Commandos like Renegade Squadron would have overwhelmed the usual garrison troops assigned to defend an Imperial starship repair facility. Your Storm Commands surprised them with a sturdy defense and the Rebels were forced to withdraw.

As Col Serra and his men fall back to their assault craft, Sarkli calls off the firefight.

'If we follow them now, we can take out all of Renegade Squadron!' says one of the lieutenants.

'Hold your fire, soldier,' you say. 'We can't pursue now with our ship under repairs.'

'We'll get another chance,' says Sarkli. 'We bloodied their noses this time, but I'm sure our paths will cross again.'

Scenario 2: Too Close A simple assault on a Rebel outpost leads to an unexpected encounter with a powerful student of the Force.

Sarkli calls a briefing of his key personnel, and you're invited. 'Imperial intel has discovered a Rebel outpost right here on Rori. The Renegades are off planet now, so we should meet with only token resistance.'

A holo pops up from the briefing room table, showing a map of Rori and the mission target. 'Our orders are to secure any information there about other Rebel facilities on the planet. There's been a lot of Alliance activity lately, so there must be a hidden base nearby. Too close for comfort.'

That evening, a landing craft drops you off with the Storm Commandos a few hundred meters away from the Rebel outpost. Under cover of darkness, your crack troops make a stealthy advance to the underground facility.

Things seem too quiet as you enter the bunker. No scouts are in evidence above, and there seem to be no active security systems.

The team slicer is running scanning equipment at the intersection of four dark corridors. 'No activity at all, Captain,' he reports.

'We still need to scrub the place looking for leftover intel,' says Captain Sarkli. 'I want every piece of furniture examined. Even if the whole facility is abandoned,' he says with disgust.

'Not abandoned, Sarkli,' says a voice from down a dark corridor. A woman's voice. 'Personnel evacuated. Except for us.' The snap-hiss of a lightsaber illuminates the face of a Twi'lek Jedi Knight. Down each of the other three corridors, another lightsaber activates.

'It's a Jedi ambush,' you say, readying your weapon.

The combat was short-ranged and vicious in the underground Rebel outpost. Corridors illuminated by the flashes of Imperial blaster fire and the arcs of Jedi lightsabers are dark and silent.

'Storm Commandos, sound off!' says Sarkli, and his men check in one by one. Many Imperials are wounded, some with severed limbs from the lightsaber battle at close quarters.

The result is that their ambush failed, and the Jedi have retreated. 'We took the best they could give and we're still here,' you say to the Storm Commandos. 'That was Rachi Sitra. She's a Jedi Knight. They don't get much tougher than that.'

Scenario 3: Nowhere to Hide When the Royal Security Forces of Naboo harbor Rebel traitors, it's your job to lead the Storm Commandos in an operation to expose them all.

'Assaulting a Royal Naboo station... what if that creates a political firestorm?' you ask Sarkli. Along with the Storm Commandos, you're aboard a landspeeder skimming over the swamps of Naboo. Information found in the hidden Rebel bunker named a security forces office that's been a front for Rebel activity.

'They're hiding Rebel traitors there,' Sarkli says with a shrug. 'That makes them traitors in the eyes of the Empire. It's been double-checked this time by Imperial intelligence. Besides, we have our mission. I'm not a politician.'

You make a mental note not to discuss politics with the Captain again. The speeder lands and your troops rush to deploy. You encounter a few RSF scouts on the approach, but the Storm Commandos take them out.

You arrive at the side door of the facility, and a small demo charge takes out the door mechanism with a muffled thump. Blaster fire sprays from the opened door, and inside are Rebel troops behind cover.

A grenade flies in the doorway and after it goes off, you and the Imperials move inside. When the smoke clears, you see a leader barking out orders to the Rebel defenders.

You're surprised to recognize Garm Bel Iblis, a former member of the Rebel High Command who was released from the Alliance. Now he's leading a band

of Rebels in a secret operation on Naboo, so his hatred for the Empire must still be intact.

Your mission is data retrieval, and these Rebels are in the way.

The Corellian tactician trained them well, but the Rebels are no match for your Storm Commandos. Iblis escapes, along with the rest of his troops. 'Let them go,' says Sarkli. 'Get the data from these computers.' The slicers go to work, while the other Storm Commandos tend to their wounds and pack up their equipment.

'We've got Rebel movements for the last three weeks. Captain,' says one of the slicers as he looks up from a computer screen.

'Get it all, lieutenant,' says Sarkli. 'Data analysis is for the headquarters, not while we're on a field op.'

Scenario 4: Bunker Busting Hidden deep in the forests of Corellia is a Rebel stronghold that the Storm Commandos are assigned to destroy.

The Storm Commandos have traveled to Bela Vistal, the Imperial stronghold on the planet of Corellia. According to the data analyzed by the slicer team, the secret Rebel stronghold is in a bunker hidden by a deep forest.

'Maybe that's how Iblis got involved with all this,' you say to Captain Sarkli. 'He's a Corellian.'

'Not my problem,' says Sarkli. 'What is my problem is getting into this bunker. We don't know much about the facility, but it's a bigger operation than anything we saw on Rori. I expect this time we'll face fortified structures with well-trained defenders.'

'That's why you guys get the big credits, right?' you say with a grin to the room full of soldiers. Not a one of them laughs. Sarkli continues to finish the briefing.

An Incom gunship puts your team on the ground about two klicks from the bunker. As the sun begins to set, you make the approach in twilight. A few Rebel sentries are taken out as the Storm Commandos approach.

One of your snipers takes out another Rebel, but when you get to the sentry's position, she lies on her back still holding her comlink. 'Roger that Bravo Two, incoming Imps. Fall back to bunker. Bravo Two, do you copy? Bravo Two?' The dead sentry doesn't reply as the comlink buzzes away.

'No more surprise,' you say to Sarkli.

'Then let's get moving,' he says.

The blast doors of the bunker slide open and Rebel commandos step outside, one by one. 'Looks like we're going to have a party on the patio before we get inside,' you say.

'Inside, outside, makes no difference to me,' says Sarkli.

The Bothan general Polo Se'lab has trained his troops well, but the Storm Commandos win the firefight. Se'lab escapes capture as your soldiers regroup before entering the bunker.

'Nice of 'em to leave the door open,' says Sarkli.

'Just because we took out their mobile strike force doesn't mean there aren't more troops inside,' you say.

'Agreed,' says Sarkli. 'Look sharp, men. Let's go.'

Scenario 5: Final Strike Inside the Rebel headquarters bunker, the Storm Commandos find the Alliance last line of defense and a Force-using war hero.

After a tough fight against Rebel commandos led by a Bothan general, the Storm Commandos are inside the Alliance bunker headquarters. Sarkli has double-checked the loadouts for every Imperial soldier. Slicers have cut the power to the lights for the facility. The alarms and security cameras are also shut down.

'Any messages transmitted from this bunker?' you say to the team's comm techs.

'Just one sir,' says one of the techs. 'Priority transmission to another location on Corellia. Heavily encrypted. We can't determine the recipient.'

'Alright, we'll call that a good sign. Only one transmission. Let's get a move on,' says Sarkli.

The Storm Commandos move through the darkened corridors with practiced ease. They clear each room, one by one, leaving none behind them. Twice they find workers hiding under furniture, but they are dispatched.

With the top floor cleared, only the basement level remains. After all the other rooms are secured, you stand in the corridor leading to the large control room in the center of the facility. The security panel is shorted out, and the heavy doors swing open.

'I thought you'd never get here,' says a voice from inside, punctuated once again by the snap-hiss of a lightsaber. You see the Hero of Yavin -- now a Commander in the Rebel Alliance -- none other than Jedi Luke Skywalker. 'I was on my way when I got the coded message. Looks like I got here just in time.'

'He's alone!' says Sarkli. 'One man against my squad of commandos?'

'One Jedi,' you say as you ready your weapon. 'More than just a man.'

Skywalker looks like he's not even breaking a sweat as his lightsaber swings back and forth. Sometimes it hacks off a blaster rifle, and other times it reflects a blaster bolt back at its firer. 'This base is abandoned,' he says. 'The Rebel Alliance has moved on.'

'Think what a prize it would be,' you shout over the whine of blaster fire, 'to return with the head of Luke Skywalker!'

The Jedi smiles. 'Not likely,' he says with a leap backwards out of range. Skywalker slashes at a door behind him, and it swings open. 'I've done enough damage to your troops for today,' he says as he bounds through the door.

When you race to the doorway, you look up to see a narrow ventilation shaft. The Jedi is already leaping out of the top and escaping the bunker. You turn around to face the other troops. 'He's gone,' you say.

'Skrag!' says Sarkli. 'Now we've got nothing to show for this whole mission.'

'Well, we closed down several Rebel operations,' you say. 'Not to mention shooting up a few of their troops in the process. I think we can call this a good day for the Storm Commandos.'

Empire Day

Finishing an important mission in the remote reaches of Naboo, you make your way back to civilization. It's important that you return to base as soon as possible. When you reach the streets of Theed near the starport, you find them blocked by wildly celebrating Gungans. You had completely forgotten that today is Empire Day.

First celebrated on Coruscant, this holiday commemorates the establishment of the Galactic Empire. Since that time, Empire Day has been celebrated on many planets throughout the Empire. The cities on many worlds are virtually shut down by streets filled with revelers, and Naboo is one of those.

Giant holoprojectors show the image of Boss Nass, leader of the Gungans. 'Meesa want yousa to have fun on Naboo for Empire Day!' Every time his voice booms out across the city, there are cheers from the dancing, singing Gungans.

As you try to fight your way through the crowds, 'Happy Empire Day!' is the phrase you hear over and over again. They don't seem to care that you have to get to the starport as soon as possible, and the fate of the galaxy hangs in the balance.

Trying to make your way across town politely is not working. You're going to have to be more determined if you're going to leave Naboo on time. 'Don't start slaughtering them,' you think to yourself. 'Just push them out of the way.'

Those Nasty Tusken

While cooling your heels in a cantina on Tatooine, a desert-worn traveler finds you. Dusting himself off, he says, 'Your presence is requested at Jabba's Palace.' The bartender raises an eyebrow and says, 'You'd better go. If you know what's good for you.'

Making the trek to Jabba's Palace, you are ushered to an office where the fattest Rodian you've ever seen sits behind a desk. He doesn't get up when you enter. 'I'm Reelo Baruk, a businessman from Nar Shaddaa, but I'm helping out the mighty Jabba here with some local trouble.'

Baruk offers you a seat and continues. 'Some of those nasty Tusks are starting to get brazen, hanging out too close to the palace. Jabba hates that. If you can take care of them, I might help you out in the future.'

You seem unimpressed, so he goes on. 'You know, the Sand People? They wear those dirty robes and carry spiked clubs? Heads wrapped in bandages? But just take care of the leader and we'll call it done. Deal?'

Art of Smuggling

Sometimes you think that you shouldn't spend all your time in cantinas, entertaining the crowd by telling them how terrific you are. However, self-promotion is an important part of your career path.

When you brag about helping a smuggler move his wares to Tatooine, this catches the ear of Bib Fortuna, the majordomo at Jabba's Palace. Shortly thereafter, you find yourself in a meeting with the Twi'lek.

'I hear that you are quite a smuggler,' begins Fortuna. Lying your way into a lucrative job for the powerful Hutt seems appealing, so you answer in the affirmative.

'We're going to give you a little test.' The majordomo smiles with many pointed teeth, and you feel a chill run up your spine. 'My Master wants to see how many goods you can smuggle into Mos Eisley in the next two weeks. If you do well, you will get more work. How does that sound?'

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